



The Son of Esau



Minnie Gilmore



Bought at
BERTRAND SMITH
140 Pacific Ave.
LONG BEACH,
CALIFORNIA

nb



A SON OF ESAU



Minnie Dillmore.

A SON OF ESAU

BY
MINNIE GILMORE
AUTHOR OF
“PIPES FROM PRAIRIE-LAND,” ETC.

“And so taking bread and the pottage of lentils, he ate, and drank, and went his way ; making little account of having sold his first birth-right.”—GENESIS, XXV, 34.

“The wages of sin, is death.”—ST. PAUL, vi., 23.

NEW YORK
LOVELL, CORYELL & COMPANY
43, 45 AND 47 EAST TENTH STREET

COPYRIGHT, 1892,
BY
UNITED STATES BOOK COMPANY,

[All rights reserved.]

TO

My Father

P. S. GILMORE, MUSICIAN

from whose flower of genius my seed of talent is inherited,
and to whose tender love, patient faith, and generous indulgence,
I owe all that has fostered the little seed to bud and bloom, and

TO

My Mother

"A PERFECT WOMAN"

whose pæan awaits an angel-voice to sing it,
above Love's *vox humana*, heaven high.

With the prayer of my soul,
the love of my heart, and the service of my life,

I INSCRIBE THIS BOOK

"If life-blood's fertilizing, I wrung mine
On every leaf of this."

E. B. BROWNING.

2061825

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. NEWFIELD,	1
II. HARRIMAN'S BLOCK,	10
III. "FRESHET SAL,"	24
IV. SISTERS,	27
V. THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB GIVES A DANCE,	40
VI. ACROSS THE RUBICON,	63
VII. "THE COST AND THE PAIN,"	75
VIII. TO YOUTH'S SWEET PAGE,	93
IX. IN GOD'S GOOD TIME,	109
X. THE DANCE IN JENKINS' BARN,	119
XI. SAL RECEIVES A CALL, AND MAKES ONE,	132
XII. THE HONEYMOON,	140
XIII. THE HONEYMOON WANES,	145
XIV. THE HONEYMOON FLICKERS OUT,	154
XV. A MIDNIGHT TOAST,	167
XVI. MAGDALEN,	178
XVII. FROM FLAME TO ASHES,	185
XVIII. A PHANTOM GUEST,	197
XIX. SWEET CHARITY,	210
XX. AT BENEDICTION,	222
XXI. THE STAIN OF THE MIRE,	227
XXII. IN TIGHTENING TOILS,	233
XXIII. A SON AND HEIR,	241

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIV. THE REVEREND HUNGERFORD HARNEY,	251
XXV. "YOU SHALL BE RIGHTED,"	261
XXVI. CLERGY VERSUS LAITY,	268
XXVII. DRUCE'S CROWN DRAWS NEAR,	275
XXVIII. KINGSLEY SAYS GOOD-BY,	279
XXIX. EXIT RUNDELL,	287
XXX. RUNDELL'S REVENGE,	309
XXXI. "THE WAGES OF SIN IS —"	317
XXXII. "— DEATH!"	326
XXXIII. AN END, AND A BEGINNING,	339

NOTE.

As minor characters, I have ventured to introduce into this story a few "real people," who will recognize themselves, and be recognized by their neighbors. The result of such recognition may be a suspicion that the caricatures with which these are associated have been drawn from the same social circle. Therefore, I beg leave to explain that Milly and Cilly Hunter, the Linnetts, the Tompsons, etc., exemplify types unrepresented in the society, as I know it, of the Western neighborhood to which I address this note. An apology, however, is due to Mrs. Come-Ins (to echo a Newfield parody), whose faultless Queen's English I have been constrained to translate into a ruder, dialectical tongue. My excuse is that this kindly, cordial, and hospitable gentlewoman is a typical representative of a kindly, cordial, and hospitable social class. In conclusion, a word of fond and grateful acknowledgment to Mrs. Annabel Rorke, but for whose long hospitality to "Miss Bread-and-Butter, her Yankee niece," the "real people" of these pages were strangers to them !

M. L. G.

NEW YORK, May, 1892.

A SON OF ESAU.

CHAPTER I.

NEWFIELD.

Bounded by the Rocky Mountains on the west, on the east by a vagrant fork of the Arkansas River, known as the "Freshet" since the spring night thirty years before my story opens, when its flooding waters had overflowed their banks and swept away the camp slumbering on their brink, stretches a tract of country which presents at once the characteristics of mountain and prairie, of hill and valley, of wood and field; maintaining at the same time an individuality which these diverse features fail to destroy. Its mountains are such gentle acclivities, its valleys such mere dimples of descents, that they seem to accentuate rather than to interrupt the level of the fundamental plain, half-horizoned in the distance by purple mist pierced by glistening snow-streaked summits, half by an arch of prairie merged in iridescent sky.

Circling the Freshet waters in irregular random fashion, spanning them here by a bridge, there by an isthmus of made-land indistinguishable at the present day from a natural formation, the town of Newfield lifts from both upper and lower banks its blocks of shops and houses, its clustered cottages and handsome suburban dwellings;

beyond which rolls the prairie toward a background of sunlit hillocks, footstools of the royal forest throned on the mountain range. Approached from either east or west, its aspect is alike pleasing to the eye, jaded in the one case by monotonous stretches of plain whose forlorn settlements—their straggling blocks of shacks and shanties supplemented by still more straggling ranks of brutalized humanity—suggest a dead-level of life infinitely more desolate than its prototype in surrounding nature; in the other, by deserts of sand and sage-brush, and seamed, shrivelled, ghastly alkali wastes. The gradual slopes that mark its site prepare one for the farther foot-hills, and for the mountains looming in abrupt range beyond; while the town itself, in spite of an almost aggressive air of prosperity, has a cordial, open-hearted, happy-go-lucky atmosphere about it, alluring in its suggestiveness of vital youth and hope.

In natural aspect, Newfield, of course, varies with the seasons. There are brief times when its surface features seem all but obliterated, the town-site, the adjacent plains, the more distant foot-hills, the mountains, even the overhanging sky itself, presenting from horizon to horizon a single, vast, unbroken blur of snow. But these "white days" are but episodes, the ordinary winter day of the region displaying the reviviscence of vivid autumn, set like the flame in an opal, in a monotint of snow.

Neither autumn nor winter aspect seems characteristic of Newfield, however. Irresistibly, one associates it with fairer seasons of bloom and song and sun. When the spring with golden chisel carves through the marble of the frozen snows till the green bases of the mountains reappear beneath their white turrets; and the streams, breaking from their icy bonds like butterflies from the

chrysalis, flash flocks of wavelets seaward on skimming new-fledged wings ; when the willows and oaks and cedars re-don their emerald vesture, and the nude gray limbs of the cottonwoods are draped anew with tenderest green ; when the buffalo-grass puts up its spears, and the daisies and wind-flowers and mountain-lilies break in white and gold and azure from a mosaic of spiraea and vetch ; when the violet blends its blue with the iris, and the wild rose blushes with envy beside the rosy shooting-star ; when the sun from dawn to gloaming shines unshadowed in blinding golden splendor, and the crisp cool air of the mountains is warmed and scented in its flight through a flowered, myriad-winged, song-laden June—then indeed, and then only, does Newfield look itself—a new Eden, fulfilling the fair tradition of the old :

“A paradise of pleasure . . . brought forth of the ground all manner of trees, fair to behold, and pleasant to eat of . . . And a river went out . . . to water paradise, . . . and the gold of that land is very good.”

To him who alights at its little station, the main street of Newfield runs down like an eager host with hand outstretched in greeting. Buildings of brick and granite bound it on either side, their architectural monotony relieved, here by the dome and spires of a Christian fane, there by the rival thyrsus of pagan Bacchus. On the north corner a staid old post-office sets its face against the south corner, where an upstart telephone tinkles its clamorous bell. A Morning Daily flouts its type from the east side, at an Evening Daily waiting for its type, on the west. Beyond rises the great hotel—haunt of commercial “drummers,” of dashing “confidence-men,” of footlight stars of passage, of gay young bachelors, of truant benedicts, of unencumbered wives, of “willin’” widows, of

maidens rich in ringlets as in years ; while farther on, the new town-hall, proudly ycleped Opera House, lifts an attenuated but patriotic marble eagle, in neighborly juxtaposition to the court-house weathercock—an ironical emblem, in its gilded instability, of the Justice throned within.

Leaving the town-centre, the main street of Newfield soon outstrips its bordering brick pavements, which are substituted first by plank paths appropriately called "walks," each and all of them not only walking but absolutely running off, darting here into a ditch, mounting there to a precipitous and unscalable height, disappearing elsewhere into some yawning roadside gully ; later, by banks of grass and brush, dotted with wayside flowers. Beckoned by silver-green cottonwoods, by sapling pines astray from their parent-groves, by wild-rose thickets masquerading in thorns like maids in knightly armor, the long road sweeps from the town suburbs to their adjacent camps and settlements, beyond which, corn and grain fields, slim young orchards, and vast fields grazed by horse and cattle, mark rich outlying districts of ranch and farm.

Twice daily, once in the vivid glow of the morning sunshine, once in the shadows of the evening dusk, the "through express," panting and puffing like an exhausted giant, halts for breath in the little town. While it is still afar, cutting its iron-shod way through the distant mountains, its shrill, clear whistle resounds through Newfield, announcing its approach. Then, throughout the entire town a transformation is observable. The station, but now apparently deserted, suddenly brims with active life. There is a simultaneous influx of travellers, baggage, and uniformed officials ; carriages whirl down the street

to the waiting-room entrance ; small boys gather about the doors. Women lean from the windows of the neighboring cottages, and salesmen follow their customers from the shops, and look down toward the tracks. Then, too, sauntering from field or cottage, or lounging toward the station from saloon and corner, may be seen a quaint procession of solitary figures, with hands in tattered pockets and ragged hat-brims set more or less rakishly upon ne'er-do-well heads—figures such as every railroad town duplicates, and are to every traveller a familiar, pathetic sight. Day after day, year after year, the express comes and goes, and finds them as it left them, leaves them as it found them, watching, always watching—waiting, always waiting—for whom or what, God knows ! Like wraiths they issue forth, like wraiths they fade from view, wraith-like to haunt the heart when eyes no longer see them. Somewhere, one knows, in patient, wistful quest, still they are watching, waiting.

The west-bound train arrives at daybreak ; hence the migrator from the east is greeted on the very threshold of Newfield by the golden augury of the morning sun. His first impulse is to accept the invitation of the long main street and follow it whither it leads him. This instinct is born sometimes of idle curiosity, often of eager interest ; but most commonly of that instinctive desire for one last hour of respite, known to all whose wheels of life are forced, of a sudden, to adjust themselves to new and untried grooves. The masculine stranger, sauntering, satchel in hand, through the town and beyond it, is a familiar figure to Newfield, but one that never fails to attract general attention. The shopmen lean from their doors to gaze after him ; the saloon-loafers cease their desultory chat, and stare in silence as he passes ; children

leave their games to follow in his footsteps, caricaturing his gait and carriage, while small dogs bark and caper in the rear ; young girls steal curious glances at him, and if he, too, be young and comely, smile shyly to themselves, and blush, and pass with quickened heart-beats ; housewives catching a glimpse of him through blinds or curtains, hasten to their doors in kindly, womanly interest, and watch him out of sight. Soon he returns to face the new life—whether for victory or defeat, who knows ? Not the men, nor the children, nor even the new-comer himself, asks the question ; the hope of youth, the resolve of manhood, admits no possibility of defeat. Only the hearts of the maidens ask it, and the wistful eyes of the women. But to their mute question no present answer comes.

After the continental express, the local trains steaming in and out of the town by day and night, are features of Newfield life which demand recognition. Morning after morning, out of sight of the rows of cottages whence young wives wave their aprons, young mothers beckon their babies' tiny hands, they bear crowds of sturdy, sombreroed, high-booted laborers with tools over shoulders, and dinner-pails swinging from brawny hands ; returning at night, sometimes swiftly and joyously, with triumphant clang of bell and whistle ; sometimes slowly and silently, with engines sobbing and shuddering like suffering things—a burden of bitter human pain behind them. A mine has caved in, or a bridge given way, or a misplaced switch has done its fatal work, and the dead and wounded are many ; or there has been a quarrel, and a blow or shot, and one man's working-time is ended, and one woman's weeping-time begun. But these are only the common mischances of border-life. Like ripples on

the Freshet waters they come and go—the tide flows on unheeding.

On the last night of the work-day week—the gala night of the week for Newfield—the local train, indeed, reigns supreme. Long before the hour of its arrival the human life of the town seems to empty itself into the little station. All is bustle, excitement, expectation. “Runners” for the rival hotels, saloons, and haunts lower down in the social scale, struggle for vantage-ground with stage-drivers, teamsters, and pack-encumbered and encumbering pedlers; itinerant showmen, erecting their tents on the verge of the tracks, lift rival voices, each announcing his own attraction and denouncing his neighbors’ with a play of word and wit worthy of nobler cause. Often from one of these tents emerges a half-nude figure clad only in gaudy tights and glittering spangles; sometimes a man’s figure, usually a woman’s. Ordinarily the performance is a rope-walk above the track-side roofs, or from pole to pole across the narrow river. When it is ended a cheer goes up from the crowd, and a shower of “nickels” and dimes falls into the showman’s hat. Then, if the crowd wait still, some street-corner auctioneer, tramping his southward way toward credulous, trinket-loving negrodom, sets up his stand, and sends his confederate to the front to open bids, preluding his nasal eulogy of gay cotton handkerchiefs, glass diamonds, brass and tin jewelry, (warranted pure silk, first water, and precious metal, respectively) and innumerable other articles of his stock in trade, with a clever medley of jest and song and story.

Meanwhile the throng grows restless. Men and women struggle with one another for foothold. A rough contest, begun in jest by a couple of youths in the background, ends in earnest, and it is shouted that there will be a fight,

and boys and men force their way through the crowd and close around the combatants. Showily-garbed women, flushed with rum and rouge, jostle fresh-faced girlhood, beautiful in its youth and innocence, and curse defiance of the contrast; white-haired men, with the pathetic resignation of helpless, hopeless Age in their faces, stand side by side with anxious-eyed wives and mothers, waiting with mingled hope and dread what the train shall bring.

A cheer from the crowd announces that the train is in sight. A moment, and it slackens, stops. Then from the cars a motley throng descends—shifts from the rival mines; contract-gangs from the roads and bridges; timber-men from the camps; cattle-men from the ranches; cowboys desperate with long isolation, recklessly bent upon wild orgies whose memory shall warm their blood when the horror of lonely days and nights on the silent plains shall threaten to congeal it; hunters from the mountains and forests, with dogs and guns and game; gamblers from neighboring camps and city; real estate “boomers;” contractors, overseers, engineers, representatives of every form and degree of western labor and speculation—all pour in a very torrent of humanity into the little town, to such result of wild carouse and revel as could be tolerated only in a comparatively new and socially lawless community.

And dating, though it does historically, if somewhat hazily, from the early fifties, Newfield is still a new settlement; not only in the worst, but in the best and truest sense of the word, as well. The spirit of youth, sanguine, energetic, indomitable, is in it—a spirit which, paradoxical though it be, only comparative maturity can conceive. In their earliest youth our pioneer communities are at their oldest; old in the worst and saddest sense,

with the disappointment, failure, despair, and consequent bitter recklessness of decaying settlements which surge into them at their outset, impelled by such forlorn hope as, while life lasts, outlives despair.

These baleful elements, inseparable from a new and wealth-seeking community, are slow to become extinct, and in the meantime the social problem is generated. According to popular belief, the social life of the West is nothing if not simple ; in fact, its simplicity is, at the present day, its most complex feature. The lawless spirit of pre-civilized days survives, at bitter war with the ethics of older conservative civilization pitted against it. Between the two stands the class which, after the native element, is accepted as representative of the West—the cosmopolitan immigrant class of strong, rude, ambitious spirits which, set face to face in solitude with the universal Mother, cast off the oppressive sense common in effete and over-crowded communities, of unindividuality, of irresponsibility, of entity existent not in the individual human unit, but only in the unity of Humanity ; and develop in their rebound a dignity, an independence, an uncompromising, even aggressive assertiveness, alike evasive and defiant of conventional social classification.

Nevertheless, the social problem of the West is not unsolvable. Already from its primal chaos order is evolving. The brutality of lingering barbarism, the materialism of an immature and inferior civilization, the libertinism of a primitive society whose standards are uncertain, whose laws as yet uncompiled, are passing away. When the evolution is complete, the social millennium of our Republic will have come. Already the West has conceived it. In ripe time, her travail ended, she shall bring it forth.

CHAPTER II.

HARRIMAN'S BLOCK.

On the evening of which I write, the border-town whose characteristic features have been described but cursorily, flashed from its lonely site like a terrene star, its myriad rays flickering in far fantastic shadows across the dark landscape. Every shop on the long main street was illumined ; lamps were shining at the windows, lanterns swaying above the open doors ; while upheld in zealous hands, scores of torches with long flames veering in the wind, burned before a new and imposing structure of stone and marble, at whose entrance was stationed in twofold glory of uniform and instrument, the Newfield brass band. The occasion was the formal opening of "Harriman's Block," which included not only the Opera House already mentioned, but also the new and luxurious quarters of the popular private bank hitherto known as Harriman's, but henceforth to bear the more imposing title of the Newfield Bank. Half a dozen blocks away, in darkness and desolation, the humbler brick building which had done bank-duty heretofore, hid its diminished head ; and like the old building, the old administration had had its day. "*Le roi est mort. Vive le roi!*"

The inaugural ceremonies which were drawing to a close within the Opera House had been long and enthusiastically anticipated by the inaugurators thereof, if not by the inaugurated. Months previously a committee

had been formed ; meetings held at midnight hours within the secret chambers of the Whiskey Straight Club ; resolutions formerly drawn up, and signature with much flourish of pen by the resolvers collectively designated therein as "We, the undersigned :" the local orators forewarned of the "impromptus" to be inspired by the occasion ; and last, but not least, the Newfield brass band bound under greenback bonds, to figure in the grand finale with trumpet and fife and drum.

And the glorious end did honor to the means.

The Whiskey Straight Club, if not individually sobered on the eventful night, at least was generally so, and shaved and shirted, to a man ; the resolutions were declaimed by a native Demosthenes, whose cuds of tobacco realistically represented the historic pebbles ; the impromptu orators not only outdid themselves, but capped the climax of eloquence by outdoing one another ; the trumpet brayed its brashest challenge and the drum responded with its deepest growl. And now, with simultaneous flourish of bandanna and metaphor, the master of ceremonies was delivering the closing address. On the stage surrounding him were seated the representative men of Newfield ; *i.e.*, such financial, professional, and social powers as even in border-towns be, painfully self-conscious cynosures of the keen and quizzical eyes of the represented, crowding the Opera House from stage to exits, galleries, lobby, and aisles.

The alliterative peroration was in the throes of delivery. It proclaimed America to be the stronghold of the world ; the West the stronghold of America ; Colorado the stronghold of the West ; Denver—the name was drowned in such a volley of groans, cheers, and hisses as only the loyal factions of rival American townships can emit—Denver the present, Newfield the future stronghold of Colorado !

The disapproving Denverites were in the minority. A thousand Newfield throats sent up a commendatory shout which was echoed by the crowd without. There was a din with which the roof vibrated ; a characteristic, spontaneous outburst in which hands, feet, hats, voices, and whistles simultaneously took part. The master of ceremonies pursued his alliterative way.

“The stronghold of Newfield is in its ambitious, energetic, enterprising, successful Newfielders !”

During the ensuing applause the self-consciousness of the representative men deepened from pain to agony. Representative feet shuffled and hands twisted. Representative faces, even such as knew neither Whiskey Straight Clubs overnight, nor matutinal Caudle-lectures (wherein wively tongues, falling foul of the club-title, laid caustic stress upon the exclusive relation of the adjective to its antecedent), flushed an apoplectic purple.

“Hear ! hear !” shouted the represented.

“Hear !” echoed the crowd.

“Out here !” supplemented a wag, from the street.

The master of ceremonies resumed :

“The stronghold of Newfield is in its men, plural ; the stronghold of its men is in a single representative man. This man, pioneer of us all—he who lifted the first tent on Newfield ground, sunk the first spade in Newfield soil, struck the first pick on Newfield ore ; who led the way that we might follow, and opened the gate that we might pass in ; he who has aided the weak and speeded the strong ; who has spurred on the timid and held back the reckless ; who has been a father to the young, a brother to the mature, a son to the aged ; who has shared his luck with the unlucky, and grudged not to cheer on the lucky to their goal ; he who has accepted our small trusts

with our great ones, and been loyal to each and all—this man, founder of Newfield, father of Newfielders, life-long and faithful guardian of Newfield's financial trusts, is

JOHN HARRIMAN!"

The acclamation was deafening. The walls shook, the rafters rang with it. Men cheered and women sobbed. From the centre of the stage an old man walked to the front; a white-haired, venerable figure infused for the moment with all the erectness and vigor of youth. He stood with bowed head while the applause thundered on. When he turned back to his seat, tears were running down his face.

The speaker resumed.

"As holder of such trusts John Harriman resigns, to be succeeded by his son,

STEELE HARRIMAN."

A young man of splendid physical proportions rose from his seat on the stage and gravely acknowledged the public plaudit.

"To be succeeded by his son, Steele Harriman," reiterated the interrupted orator; "to-night formally installed

BANKER OF NEWFIELD!"

"Home, Sweet Home," struck up the band outside, in apposite suggestion. The inauguration ceremonies were at an end.

The master of ceremonies made his bow and retired, the representative men following him with suspicious alacrity; whereupon the emulative spirit of the represented inspired them to a sudden exchange of mysterious

winks and signals, which watchful wives, intercepting, promptly annulled by unanimous declaration that the exchanges thereof were to "march straight home."

As the stage cleared there was long and loud applause, a general upthrowing of hats, a final volley of lusty cheers. Then, down the broad stairs to the street, displacing the band and forcing the torch-holders back to the opposite pavement, poured a stream of noisy humanity ; the men, picturesque in their colored shirts and wide sombreros, the women grotesque in contrast, in their forlorn suggestion of conventional gala attire. Around these, after a momentary struggle, the outstanders closed in an impenetrable human wall. There was a cordial exchange of familiar greetings, then all eyes turned expectantly toward a window overhead.

"Speech!" cried an enthusiastic torch-bearer.

"Speech! Speech!" reiterated the multitude.

"Arrah, an' its kilt entoirely we're afther bein' th' noight, wid yer sp'aches, sp'aches!" protested a musical Celtic voice. "Faith, if th' hands uv yez match'd th' tongues, there'd be more pratees i' th' pot for th' childer."

"An' thru for ye, Mrs. Murphy, dear. Wurra! wurra! wurra!" wailed a mischievous youth in the background.

"Howld yer whist, woman!" retorted Mrs. Murphy's worser half, waving his short clay pipe like a shillalah. "Shure, an' divil a tongue a man 'ud be afther wantin' at all at all, barrin' to rist th' woman's."

"Rest yer own, Paddy," advised a neighbor.

"Gi' us a rest," groaned the crowd.

A girlish voice broke the silence. "It's nigh on ter midnight, boys," it plained. "Gi' a gal a show fur a snack o' sleep afore sun-up."

"Her's a-worritin' about 'er beyuty-sleep, is Mandy!" laughed a woman, shrilly. "Let 'er out, boys. Bob Jenkins 'll git skeert afore he buys th' ring, ef 'taint getten reg'lur."

A broad-shouldered young farmer, a rugged weed in appearance, but whose opaque complexion proved him by all poet-lore to be but a timid flower, since born to blush unseen, grinned consciously, and shuffled into the scrawny shadow of his paternal parent, who turned upon the speaker a pair of twinkling gray eyes.

"Bob Jenkins hed his skeer, bet that thar Sunday squint o' your'n, ole gal," he said, "when he fust seed yo'! an' Mandy 'yer, nor nary gal, hain't half a show ter skeer him, arter."

A howl of delight greeted this outburst, and the "ole gal," certainly not a creature of beauty, subsided. At the same instant a sudden flash of light from the Opera House attracted all eyes to a balconied window overhead.

"Shet up yer heads."

"Yer they come."

"Three cheers fur th' old un!"

"A tiger fur young Steele Harriman!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Ra-a-a-a-a-ah!"

The big drum rolled an enthusiastic accompaniment to the cheers that greeted the simultaneous appearance of the Harrimans—father and son—at the Opera House window. Then out upon the upper balcony stepped John Harriman.

"My friends," he began, simply, "I'm gettin' old!"

No murmurs of polite dissent greeted this avowal. The crowd accepted the truth as self-evident, and waited for what should follow. What did follow was unexpected.

The old girl who had attacked Mandy Smith, and been routed with slaughter by Mandy Smith's prospective kinsman, was still sore from the slur cast upon her beauty, and her misery had the proverbial desire for company.

"I'm gettin' old," repeated John Harriman, emphatically.

The old girl rose to the occasion.

"Sure, an' thar's nary fool sayin' aught ter th' differ'," she shouted. "Hain't ye getten no lookin'-glass ter th' big house, ole man, thet ye're tellin' fur news wot's plum'-plain ez yer nose this twenty year?"

Old John Harriman was undisturbed.

"Th' old," he went on, "th' old must clear track fur th' young."

The light from the lamps behind shone on his long white hair, on his high broad brow, on his soul-illumined eyes. He looked a patriarch of yore ; an Elias with inspired gaze fixed on the chariot of his translation.

"I kem here a poor lad," he said, "kem here before th' first o' ye, when th' only roofs as sheltered us was th' pines, when our only food was wot our guns shot down, an' our only neighbors—God help us—them as gev welcome wi' whoop an' torch an' hatchet!"

His voice was the voice of a victor.

"I hev lived through it all," he cried, "lived through th' hardship, an' th' want, an' th' danger ; lived through th' wearin' years o' struggel, an' waitin', an' failyer ; lived ter stand here ter-night, th' father o' Steele Harriman, th' happiest man on all God's happy earth!"

His face was almost dazzling in its radiance.

"Through all these here years," he said, "we hev b'en, ye an' me, as a father an' his chil'ren ; through all these here years I hev took yer little piles, an' saved 'em, an'

swelled 'em fur ye ; through all these here years I hev b'en a proud man, a glad man, a grateful man fur yer trust in me. Ter-night, thankin' ye fur switchin' that trust onter young'rer an' strong'rer shoulders, thankin' ye fur givin' it inter young'rer an' abler'r hands, thankin' ye—me, th' father—fur th' faith an' trust ye pass down ter th' son, I am a proud'rer, a glad'rer, a gratefuller'r man, by far ! ”

His arms strained toward them.

“ I love ye,” he cried, “ ev'ry man, an' woman, an' child o' ye. Side by side we've stood tergether, shar'd failyer an' good fortun', hoped, an' joyed, an sorrered, heart ter heart. If I didn't know as my son Steele was good an' squar' an' honest, if I couldn't sw'ar ter his faith an' truth an' honor, if the smalles'est, faintes'est fear o' him was in my heart—by ev'ry star above I sw'ar that son or no son, I would smite him wi' my own hand, like Abra'm his Isaac, before yer piles should quit my keepin' fur my son Steele's, ter-night ! ”

There was a spontaneous burst of applause from the crowd. There were tears in many of the honest eyes. Old John Harriman lifted his outstretched arms toward heaven.

“ As he does by ye,” he said, “ as he is true ter yer trusts, as he holds ter yer faith, as he stands by ye in good an' in bad days, in th' beginnin' an' in th' end —so, fur good or fur bad, fur joy or fur sorrer, fur blessiu' or fur curse, God do unter him, my one son—God do unter him ! ”

The rude eloquence went straight to the hearts of the simple hearers. There was not a dry eye, not an untouched soul, among them as the old man stepped from the balcony and disappeared in the room behind.

Young Harriman, taking his place upon the impromptu platform, scanned the faces below him with a momentary

look of keen, almost quizzical, criticism. As the light shone full upon him a murmur rose from the crowd, akin to the spontaneous tribute of the thrilled multitude to the young gladiator stripped for the arena. He was a splendid specimen of perfect physical manhood—a grandly-built young giant of one and thirty, with fine head set imperiously upon powerful shoulders, flashing dark eyes clouded with gray, and sensuous lips that met relentlessly over strong white teeth. He wore a jacket of rough cloth, buttoned closely to his handsome throat, whose vocal promise his sonorous tones fulfilled. He bared his head and ran his hand quickly through his dark hair.

“Boys,” he said, “you know me!”

The brusque, matter-of-fact address was not without its charm. With a sigh of relief his auditors descended from the heights to which John Harriman’s burning words had lifted them.

“ You have known me, the greater number of you, since I was a little chap the size of Charity Brown’s Tommy there, asleep in his mother’s arms.”

There was a murmur of friendly assent. He struck one hand, clenched tightly, upon his open palm.

“ If you run any risk,” he said, “ you run it with your eyes open.”

“ We bean’t no bit afeard o’ ye, lad,” shouted a friendly voice. He did not heed it.

“ If I break faith with you, I break it with myself! Not a thing a man means to do, not a thing a man does deliberately; yet men have done it, and men will do it, to the end of time!”

His face, calm to impassiveness, was suddenly moved by some strong emotion. His voice rang out in impulsive passionate appeal.

“How should I know that I am better, stronger, truer than these?” he cried. “How can I swear that I will not prove one of them?”

There was an uneasy stir in the crowd. This was not the style of address that had been expected from masterful Steele Harriman. Feet shifted, and questioning eyes met confusedly. Suddenly a manly voice broke the silence :

“Ye’re an’ honest-spoken lad,” it said. “We’ll resk ye!”

And a hundred voices caught up the cry.

“We’ll resk ye, lad! We’ll resk ye!”

Was his curious pallor born only of the light slanting suddenly from the window behind, or of some mystic evil premonition, as he heard them?

For a moment he stood with parted quivering lips. Then, regaining his self-control, he ended his speech with a few commonplace yet eloquent words. His voice, as he disappeared, vibrated along the silence like an echoing organ-tone.

Two men, contrasts, typically, to their fellow-townsmen, had lingered on the outskirts of the crowd, interested spectators of the scene. As the cheers died away, the younger turned impulsively to his companion.

“He is a young Anak,” he said, “and the body is the symbol of the spirit. I would swear by him as by my own soul.”

The reply of Thaddeus Keene, M.D., was characteristic of him.

“So would all these other fools,” he said, curtly.

For a moment they walked on in silence. Then Dr. Keene broke out suddenly and fiercely.

"Fools!" he repeated. "Fools!" Judging the spirit by the flesh that masks it—mistaking mere animal magnetism for the power of a pure and upright soul!"

He struck his cane sharply against the plank sidewalk.

"He is a handsome animal," he said, "with the animal nature—rapacious, unscrupulous, irresponsible."

They had turned from the main street into a cross-road shadowed by cottonwoods. As Dr. Keene spoke, a girl, mounted on a bay pony, flashed past them, followed by two horsemen, who cheered as they gained upon her.

"Miss Sterling, I think," said Druce, quickening his pace. "Can those men be annoying her?"

"Impossible!" answered the doctor. "Our boys are rough, but not ungallant. She should not ride alone at night, however. I wonder why that young calf, Holbrook, is not baa-baaing round her, as usual. He has been living in a fool's paradise of late, poor young simpleton! When the flaming sword drives him out, mark my words, no angel's hand will wield it! Only the strength, daring, and fascination of the other type will ever pierce her maiden armor. At present, she is the most graciously ungracious young person of her sex. One always feels declined, with thanks!"

"Her reserve is not ungraciousness, I think," replied Druce, after a moment. "She is proud, in a gentle, maidenly, exquisitely virginal way; but her heart peeps through her hauteur as shyly and sweetly as a young spring crocus out of the April snow. To me she seems a type of the highest, purest, sweetest species of girlhood. Years ago I—I knew one like her."

His voice faltered, but the doctor, absorbed in the subject of the moment, did not heed his emotion. "Of course, she is a disciple of yours?" he queried.

"I fancy," answered Druce, "that she is the disciple of One higher, independent of creed and priest—one of the chosen ones who, unaided, walk with Him. I am somewhat surprised, however, that she is not a Catholic. Her father came of Catholic stock, and Mrs. Rounds tells me that she was educated in a convent. The atmosphere of the cloister hovers about her still. One feels, rather than sees, the vestal veil."

"You approve the vestal veil?"

"I venerate it out of as in the cloister. It is the unseen wing upon which pure women soar through the world unsullied. After all, the influence of religious training in youth—an influence which, deny it as we Protestants may, no secular school exerts—cannot be over-estimated. Religion thus becomes a part of life, not apart from it. Do you know, Doctor, I sometimes find it difficult to realize that Miss Sterling is—Mrs. Rounds's sister?"

"The virginal atmosphere not quite so taugible, eh?" chuckled the doctor. "My dear Druce, both vulture and dove belong to the bird family."

The Reverend Druce, solving the enigma, scrupled his uncharitableness, and subsided into contrite silence. But the doctor's conscience was less sensitive. His conviction was that charity ceased to be a virtue, exercised in favor of Althea Rounds.

"To return to our little Easterner," he said, resuming the subject where Druce had dropped it, "why will she not return to the East, where she belongs? The West is too brutal for her tender soul and heart. Even socially she is incongruously out of place. Newfield and New York—the 'Shakespeare Club,' and Marmaduke Sterling's daughter! Pah! The association is an absurd—under the circumstances, a pathetic mistake!"

"Marmaduke Sterling was a great man in the world of letters, Doctor?"

"No, he was a man who just missed being great. He was the seed. His daughter is the flower. Alas for her! born to the artist-heritage which means for the woman a life-long lien on Pain. Much as I dread the West for the girl, I dread it more for the artist. The artistic nature is too fine for us. As an episode the rude experience might not hurt her, but there is absolutely no chance that it will be but an episode. She has come to stay. It is *Kismet*."

"You mean that she will marry?" asked Druce, not uncheerfully.

"I mean that she will be married," replied the doctor, with fine distinction. "The local man will be hit, hard hit. He will be strong, passionate, picturesque—a new type to her; and she will mistake her bewilderment, her fear, her fascination, for love. She is open to impressions; the awakening from her poet-dreams, the invasion of her virgin-shrine, will daze her. Poor little fledgling song-bird thrust into the shadow of the eagle's wing, what hope that the eagle will spare her?"

"She is in God's hands, Doctor," reminded the young minister, gently.

"And in Althea Rounds's," sighed the doctor, "who will move earth and he—aven, take my word for it, Druce, to bring the girl and Harriman together! She will have her little motive—irreproachable Althea!"

"Now, Doctor!"

"Don't 'now Doctor' me in defence of Althea Rounds. I know her! George Rounds disapproves her intimacy with Harriman, and Althea disapproves his disapproval. Her sister will be the tool and victim of her revenge. The tool, because she will be used for Althea's ends; the vic-

tim, because her future will be sacrificed to Steele Harriman's past, whose unlaid ghost must haunt her—not in the form of Althea, of the Ledge, however; but of Sal, of the Freshet cabin!"

The minister halted in his walk, turning upon the doctor a protesting, pained young face.

"Surely, Doctor," he cried, "you do not, you cannot believe that cruel slander?"

"Five years ago," evaded the doctor—"before your Newfield day, I think—Jack Harriman, Steele's younger brother, met a tragic death in a gambling-hell of the mining-camp known as Smith's Settlement. Rumors of foul play followed the body, which Steele brought home for interment, and after the funeral he returned to the camp, where he lingered for several months. Less than a year later, the woman Sal, with her new-born child, appeared in the Freshet cabin. I attend the child—who is slowly but surely dying of a spinal weakness born with her—and discovered by merest chance that *she was born in Smith's Settlement.*"

"A coincidence," laughed Druce, "which affords not the slightest excuse for your suspicions. Doctor, you surprise me."

"To the deuce with your coincidence," fumed the irascible doctor. "I tell you that the child is a Harriman."

The Reverend Druce, halting abruptly, lifted his hat.

"Good-night," he said.

The old man looked at the resentful young face regretfully, even yearningly, for the moment. Then he turned away with characteristic stoicism.

"One more moth for the flame to scorch!" he muttered, and went his way alone.

CHAPTER III.

“FRESHET SAL.”

In the meantime the hero of the evening, forcing his way through the dispersing crowd, had vaulted to his saddle, and turned into a road leading somewhat circuitously northwestward from the town. At first he spurred his mare to a fierce gallop, but little by little, as the peace of the midnight stole upon him, he retarded her pace to a steady canter, which gradually slackened to a walk.

All about him was the shadowy semi-darkness of the spring night. He paused under a clump of pines wavering in the starlight like the hovering phantoms of some dusky Titan race, and bared his head to the night-breezes. The spell of an unwontedly exalted mood was upon him. Whence had it come? What subtle, resistless force had converted his speech, in premeditation a triumph of art, into a triumph of nature? What boyish impulse had constrained him to stretch out his arms in sudden passionate gesture, and appeal to that gaping wondering crowd for strength and succor? His heart was throbbing excitedly; his breath passed his lips in short quick gasps. The calm moon mounted her midnight turret. The light of her lucent banners flickered across his face. The wind blew freshly about him, pungent with pine-scents, and moist with vaporous mists. The pine-boughs stirred in it, and the rustle of their spinous leafage broke on the stillness softly as a fledgling-note. The restful sounds did

not soothe him. They hurt, in their solemnity, in their tenderness, in their purity and peace, the unrestful soul within him.

Through the open door of a cabin in the gloom before him flickered a familiar light, its breeze-blown flame beckoning eerily, like some luminous phantom-hand. He spurred his mare toward it. Where the road emerged from the pine-shadows, it was bathed in, flooded with, the light of the mid-heaven moon. On both sides lay the spring prairie, a limitless field of dappled cloth of gold. To the front, distant and visionary, mystic as Sphinx behind their opaline veils of mist, rose the mountains. Between them and the cabin flashed a fall of moon-lit waters. Their voice was as the voice of his own soul. He knew it in all its keys and cadences, in all its changeful scales of skies and seasons. He knew the creak of the old boat moored just beyond the Freshet cross-roads, for years unused and forgotten; the grating of its keel on the bank, the rattle of its loosened oars, the splash of the shallow-waves against it. To-night the waters were surging restlessly, almost stormily; and over their sullen undertone sounded the liquid murmur of a tiny stream which, swollen by the spring rains, was making its way, slope by slope, down a neighboring hill-side. He lingered a moment after he had dismounted, looking down at the moon-lit waters; and even as he looked, the little stream met the strong one and was engulfed.

On the threshold of the cabin built upon the Freshet's brink stood a woman, young and of regal stature and physique; handsome, with an almost savage beauty, harmonious with its surroundings as were the distant mountains looming darkly, imperiously against the horizon of stellar sky. The light behind lent a lustrous tint

to her dark hair, and projected in bold relief the noble lines of her figure clad in a gown of dark flannel, relieved by a crimson neckerchief. Her face, etherealized by the moonlight, was turned toward him. No star in all the glowing pageantry of heaven eclipsed in radiance her sombre eyes.

“Sal,” he called, softly.

She was murmuring a weird reiterative melody, swaying her body to its fitful rhythm, and was apparently unconscious of his approach. Her voice, in its minor monotone, had the desolate, mournful music of the mountain-waters, of the winds as they sweep unhindered from pine-clad peak to peak.

“Sal!” he repeated.

The night-express was speeding along its river-side tracks. Its shrill whistle, thrice repeated, pierced the silence. The woman’s song ceased abruptly. She raised both hands to her mouth, and hollowing her fingers over her lips, sent forth a long, clear, echoing note. A single softer whistle answered it. As the sound died away, she turned to him with a defiant laugh. He took a quick step toward her. She retreated into the cabin. He followed her across the threshold, and the door shut upon them.

CHAPTER IV.

SISTERS.

Miss Isolde Sterling, cantering, or, as the West has already taught her to call it, "loping," toward the Ledge, as the crowd about the Opera House dispersed, felt guiltily conscious that she was in the exalted state of mind which her sister Althea, Mrs. George Rounds, mistress of the Ledge, was wont to designate as "fatherish." Had the unfilial adjective pierced the silence of the grave under the Eastern grasses, the peace of the dead would not have been disturbed. Among other bitter lessons, life had taught Marmaduke Sterling to expect nothing filial from his daughter Althea.

Truth to tell, the brevity of Althea's maiden years had been their one redeeming feature. With all the bitterness of her restless, ambitious, disappointed youth, she had rebelled against the social isolation born of her father's recluse-life, and absorption in lore and letters; and her rebellion had not been a silent one. When George Rounds, crossing her path by fate or chance, had turned back to look at her, found her fair, and thereupon plunged into love in characteristic headlong fashion, Marmaduke Sterling had relinquished her to his arms with a sigh, indeed; a sigh born not of paternal regret, however, but of relief and supreme content.

As for Althea, she had yielded to Love's first supplication as instinctively and responsively as the caged bird

yields to the voice that calls it outward and speeds it on its flight. Could the human bird but flee on, impelled by the same blind unquestioned instinct with which it starts out, life and love would be simpler things. But as its fledgling-wings strengthen, and their small span widens, a challenge stays its flight: "Whither bound, O bird! and who doth show thee the way?" And if the bird can answer, "Love doth show me, and leadeth me to Love's goal," it may fly on, indeed, and sing while flying; but if it answer not the question, knowing that Love has failed it, then its song dies, and its flight falters, and down from the open it sinks, sore-smitten, with broken wing and heart.

Althea's marriage did not prove a happy one. Shortly after the birth of their first and only child, it was remarked that George Rounds's ruddy blond face, frank brown eyes, and superfluity of yellow whiskers were becoming less and less familiar to Newfield eyes.

"Those dreadful mines," explained Althea, with a shrug of her handsome shoulders.

Masculine Newfield admired the shoulders, and openly marvelled that George Rounds could neglect so fine a woman. Feminine Newfield sniffed disparagingly, and suggested that the stereotyped response savored rather of evasion than of truth. As George himself corroborated her, however, during his brief and infrequent sojourns at the Ledge, Althea's position was speciously invulnerable. The fact that a few keen eyes were unblinded by either her evasion or its corroboration, failed to affect it—or her.

The lonely life which had made of Althea, at one-and-twenty, a wife and mother, had made of her younger sister, now at the same age, only a wistful-eyed dreamer; a

singer of songs in which Youth's glad note thrilled indeed, but with the subdued supplicatory cadence heard in the matin-chants of vestal voices floating from the cloister-shrine. Inheriting her father's artistic tastes and dreamful, sensitive nature, she had voluntarily forced into the isolated groove of his recluse-life her glad young years, blind to the pathos of her repressed, imprisoned youth, to the certainty that though the girlhood might be submissive the womanhood must bring new needs, new rights, new demands with it. When, a year after Mar-maduke Sterling's death, which occurred in the fourth year of Althea's marriage, to Isolde's bitter pain and bewilderment her mother remarried, she had come to Althea, a pale, pensive, almost saddened young creature, with the heart of a child, the soul of a woman, the brain of a poet and dreamer. At first Althea had asked of the gods what to do with her, but already the problem was solving itself. The sweet, glad, natural instincts common to youth and girlhood the world over, asserted themselves, and she responded as spontaneously and blissfully as the flower responds to the air and sunshine, as the fledgling bird to the impulse of glad young wings. Life opened a twofold wonder to her, Nature and Humanity. The mountains, the pines, the prairies, every unfolding leaf of budding Nature held unutterable glory for her ; but the human revelation was even more ecstastical, because more sweet. Every man was a revelation of the world to her ; every little child a revelation of heaven ; every woman a revelation of herself. A conventional and conservative society would have violated her young soul's solitude, only to leave it more solitary than before ; but the simple, cordial, social welcome of the West, which took her not only hand in hand, but heart to heart,

stormed her shy reserve and razed its walls forever. An intense love of her human kind, hitherto uncomprehended and repressed, quickened to conscious, rapturous, life within her. Her pulses leaped; the blood coursed through her veins with new impetus. She was like a flower whose petals, shut in darkness, bloom forth exultantly at the first ray of light.

At the Ledge-gate Althea was waiting—a tall, white statuesque figure—a Galatea in a garden niche.

“The bank crowd caught me,” the girl explained, as she dismounted. “I could ride neither on nor back. For an hour I was wedged between the torches and the trumpets. I hope that you have not been anxious about me, Althea?”

There was an unfamiliar note in her voice that did not escape her sister. It suggested an excitement which her words did not explain. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes luminous. Althea scanned her with curious eyes.

Suddenly she laughed, a low light laugh of keen, almost cruel enjoyment.

“You look,” she said, “like a girl—in—love.”

Isolde turned away with an impatient exclamation.

• The light words jarred upon her. How vulgar even a fastidious woman like Althea could be, she thought, intolerantly.

“I shall be down in a moment,” she said, running up the stairs. “My habit is too dusty for your dainty boudoir, Althea.”

“Or your mood too exalted—which?” asked Althea, her mocking laughter echoing up the stairs.

The girl twirled about and faced her. She looked tall and slender in her plain, close-fitting habit, whose length had curled itself about her feet. One gauntleted hand

rested upon the baluster. In the other she held her riding-crop. Her lips, naturally sweet of curve, were curled in an half-indignant, half-disdainful expression, but above them shone her eyes' shy, mute appeal.

"What do you mean, Althea?" she asked.

Althea had the intuition of a good soldier. She knew when to retreat.

"I mean that it is nearly midnight, you dissipated child," she said, "and that a syllabub of Jersey cream, mixed by my own fair hands, awaits you. Make haste, my dear, or all the old Grundies in town will be after us. A light after ten o'clock is a scandal, in Newfield."

"Thank you. I shall be down immediately," replied Isolde, turning away with a perplexed sigh. Althea was a problem. She sought in vain to solve her.

A night-lamp was burning on a stand by her bed. She lifted it to the toilet-table, and scanned her face by its gentle light, in the little muslin-draped mirror.

"She said—that I looked like—a girl—in—love!" she murmured. The flush in her soft cheeks deepened. She felt its thrill and glow, and caught the star-like radiance of her lustrous eyes. She gazed at the fair reflection, breathlessly. Did Love's vague, translucent likeness lurk indeed within it—Love the beautiful, Love the unknown? Her virgin face veiled itself in her white hands.

The room below, in its decoration and equipment, was a white and gold room pre-eminently. Fair, reposeful Althea, with her golden hair and trailing white garments, seemed a component part of it. Isolde supplied the needed touch of color as she entered. Her blonde beauty was of more vivid type than her sister's, and she had donned a rose-tinted tea-gown, whose flowing draperies gave gleams and glints of glowing ruby-tints. Althea left

the room, as she entered it. She walked to the hearth, on which the smallest of wood-fires was burning out, and, clasping her hands on the low mantel, looked musingly into the flames.

At a casual glance one would have pronounced her tall. Her semblance of height was due, however, to the graceful erectness of her carriage, and to the stately poise of her head. Her face, small and clear-cut in feature, was delicately oval, and wrapped in a pure, bright, virginal pallor, as a vestal in her veil. Her throat, disclosed by the low gown, was full and soft, like a young dove's breast. Her eyes, deep violet in color, were wide and liquid, and heavily fringed with lashes shades darker than her hair, which was bronze in shadow, golden-brown in the light, rippling back in natural waves from a broad, pure brow. Her mouth, curled like a rose-petal, was fresh and red as a little child's. In its sweetness and innocence the expression of her face, too, was childlike ; but the face, in spite of its youth, was not immature. Through the transparent veil of the fair young flesh shone a pure, tender, and earnest woman-soul.

Althea, returning with a dainty *tête-à-tête* service, arranged on a small salver, sunk into a rocker by the hearth-stone, and sipped her syllabub at ease. Her white gown trailed like snow beside her. Her smile, in its cold glitter, repeated the suggestion.

"About the evening?" she inquired. "The ride was not all. You were at the bank-opening?"

"Yes! in attempting to ride past the crowd I rode into it—a happy accident for me. I would not have missed the scene for anything. It was splendid. Picturesque, dramatic, Olympian!"

"The Olympic god being Harriman, junior, I sup-

pose?" remarked Althea. "How did he—look? What did he—say?"

"The young banker? He looked king-like. And he said such words as only a king of men could say. He told them that his faith with them was his faith with himself—that no man meant to break such faith—that nevertheless men did break it—that he was no stronger than the rest. He warned them of the risk. Risk! even his voice disproved it—his true, strong voice, ringing from his true strong soul!"

"I—hear—it!" murmured Althea.

The girl nestled closer to her, clasping caressing hands about her knee.

"It was grand, heroic, godlike!" she said. "There was something so fine about it, Althea—his admission of possible weakness, his appeal for strength and help. But the few who understood did not appreciate it. I heard one man say that he was a fool for his pains. Noblesse obliged him, but they did not know it. His divine soul cried out to them—they heard only his human voice!"

"His human voice is divine," whispered Althea, to the fire.

Isolde did not heed her. She was engrossed in her own tender thoughts.

"All his life," she said, "has been but the prelude; to-night his real life begins. A man's life must be such a great, grand thing, Althea. A woman's life is sweet and tender and beautiful, but it lacks the power of the man's. A good woman may live and die, and only God be the wiser; but a good man is like a meteor—his life illuminates both earth and sky, and its golden trail lives after him."

"An example," sneered Althea, "of the beautiful

justice of the unknown quantity called by the orthodox Divine Providence. All men are gods. A woman, at highest, can be only a Mary—a Mary, to serve and—suffer!"

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the sigh of the wind, and the gasp of the flickering fire. The girl pressed closer to her sister's knee and shuddered.

"To suffer!" she said. "It sounds so terrible, Althea. Sometimes when I wake in the night, I think of it—of all the suffering of God's poor creatures in just that single little hour. I think of the helpless anguish of the dumb creation—of the traps in the forest, the shots in the jungle, the knives in the slaughter-house, the snares in the trees. I think of the live-stock, bruised and spent, parched and starved and stifled, in the torture-pens on the railroad ; of the droves forced hither and thither by lash and prod ; of the cattle writhing under the branding-iron, and the racers bleeding from bit and spur. I think of the animals quivering on the vivisection-table ; of the beasts of burden straining, panting, shuddering under goad and whip. I think of the awful throe of universal human anguish—of the women moaning in childbirth ; of the waifs of the slums, hungry and cold and beaten ; of the girl decoyed to the dive, and the boy to the wine and dice—of the plunge of the girl in the river, and the shot of the boy through the heart. I think of the stab of the assassin and the blow of the murderer ; of the stifled cry of the victim, and the thud of the lifeless body on the ground. I think of the watchers at the windows, of the staggering steps that near them, of the horror of blows and curses, and the trample of unborn children under the rum-mad feet. I think of the beds of pain in the hospitals, of the surgical-rooms with their knives and tables,

of the death-wards and their agonies of flesh and spirit, their impotent struggles, their terror, their despair. I think of the jails and prisons, of the men and women herded like beasts ; of the suicide dead in his cell, of the murderer who looks on his gallows. I think of the asylums—of the hopeless blind, the helpless cripples ; of the dumb who strain to speak, of the deaf who yearn to hear ; of the mad, and their shrieks and shudders, as the whip sinks curling and hissing into the tortured flesh. I think of the ship going down in the ocean ; of the train crashing over the trestles ; of the dwelling gutted by fire ; and the death-throes of all three. I think of the Jugger-naut wheel of human mental agony, of the faith and hope of youth, and their slow, hard, cruel death ; of its unfulfilled dreams, its unsated desires, its disappointed ambitions, its unwon goals. I think of the brave endeavors of earnest manhood, and of life's long, bitter lesson of defeat. I think of love, unreciprocated, betrayed, bereft ; of loss, of loneliness, of heartache, of heartbreak. I think of remorse for wrongs and follies irreparable, of wild defiance born thereof, and of final, mad despair. I think of the struggle of souls with the tempter, of the groping for God through the darkness, of the cry to God through the silence, of the blind who do not see Him, and the deaf who do not hear. I think of the souls snatched in their sins, and hurled to the judgment ; of the unpurged shut in their prisons of fire, of the lost souls in eternal hell. And I shrink and shudder, and cower down in bed—I am only a coward, Althea !—dreading the time when my turn, too, shall come, and flesh and spirit bear their share of the universal pain.”

Althea rose with a shiver.

“ Go to bed, you horrible child ! ” she said. “ Great

heavens, what hideous thoughts! What put them into your innocent young head?"

"I scarcely know," said the girl. "They come, sometimes."

She put her hand to her breast, sighing wearily.

"Something in here tells me everything," she said; "everything of sin and sorrow, of life, and love, and death. I think that humanity must be like one great Eolian harp, Althea. A breath on the single string weakens common vibration."

She was very pale as she rose. Her lips, as she kissed her sister, were tremulous; her eyes heavy with unshed tears.

"An example," mused Althea, looking after her, "of the sin of the father visited upon his child. Poor, little, morbid, tender-hearted fool! There is only one cure for her. She must dream love's dream—and waken."

Upon her lips played a sudden smile. Not of tenderness for the girl's love-dream! She smiled for the sure awakening.

She turned down the lamp till its light was but a tiny spark, and sunk down by the dying fire. Its flickering flames, fanned by a swirl of wind down the chimney, writhed up to meet her. She held her large white hands toward them, and fixed her eyes on their fitful glow. Thus she had watched out many a midnight vigil; thus she would watch out one now.

The strong night-wind was rising. It swelled and soughed from its mountain-cave like waves from a sonorous sea. The boughs of the cottonwoods rustled, and the young grass stirred as if the train of a phantom-garment swept it. In the hall a clock ticked loudly—a great old-fashioned thing, with a pendulum that clicked between

its ticks, swaying to and fro in its worn old case. From an inner room came the sound of a sleeping child's deep breathing. Peaceful sounds, all of them, monotonic voices of the night, blending in sweet lullaby and benediction with the dream of the innocent child, and the prayer of the girl up-stairs. But they brought no peace to Althea. A restless mood was on her. Thoughts whirled like wheels of fire through her brain—thoughts of a wasted past, of an empty present, of a future from which she shrunk in doubt and dread !

A wind-wave broke outside. Its invisible spray dashed sharply against the pane. She sprung to her feet and listened. Had some one tapped on the pane ? No, the wind swept on, and the night resumed its silence. The tick of the clock was the only sound—and the sleeping child's deep breathing.

The cruel smile was still on her lips as she went back to her reverie. Yes, Isolde must dream her dream of love, and waken ! Who should hold her the love-dream—the dream to which the reality is what the desert is to the mirage ? Any man, one as well as another ! What did it matter ?

In an open case on the mantel stood a porcelain portrait of her husband—a strong, fair man, with the soft brown eyes of a girl, and the mouth of a man and master. She took it down and scanned it with untender eyes, by the light of the dying fire. Then she replaced it with a scornful shrug.

“ Any man would have done as well,” she murmured. “ Almost any man would have done better. After all, it is not the lover, but the love of the lover, that counts.”

The clock in the hall ticked louder. Its voice seemed to echo up the stairs as if it, too, were thinking of Isolde.

Who should hold her the love-dream? Althea was asking.
Who? who? who? ticked the clock.

Of a sudden her thoughts reverted to a word of Isolde's. The mad old clock caught it up, and reiterated it louder and louder through the silence of the night.

"It was grand, heroic, godlike, Althea!" Godlike!—that was the word. Only one man is ever godlike to a woman. Already he was this to her.

She dragged herself to her feet, slowly and heavily, and walking to the window, opened it and leaned out. The midnight moon was waning. The world looked wan and ghastly in its pallid light. The town was shrouded in shadows. Only an occasional light wavered from its dark expanse, as a last pale taper flickers from a bier. The Ledge-road swept to the right, whence it whirled suddenly southward, cutting a straight course to the Freshet cross-roads. A faint ray of light glimmering from the Freshet cabin pierced the darkness. She looked at it long and fixedly.

"If it were not for—that!" she murmured. "If it were not for—that!"

The wind ruffled her smooth hair and blew back the lace from her throat. It was chill and damp with the damp of dews and the chill of the ghastful hour. She shivered, but she did not know it. She was thinking, thinking.

Suddenly she laughed, a low, hard, bitter laugh, which the wind caught up and echoed.

"In a man's love there is always an 'if' for the woman to face," she thought. "Whether this 'if' or another—what matters it?"

She turned back to the porcelain portrait, bending a long, still look upon it—not of tender, wifely love, in-

deed ; yet a softened look of piteous womanly protest and appeal. If George had seen it—

If ! if ! if ! ticked the clock.

But even as she looked, she was again the calm, impassive, imperturbable Althea the world knew her.

Galatea, for the moment a woman, had resumed her marble mask.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB GIVES A DANCE.

Between the young banker and the Ledge mistress, in the earlier days of her married life, there had waxed an intimacy which, unfortunately for Althea, her husband did not share. The two men were antipathetic to each other by nature. The one distrusted, the other resented the distrust ; and from such background of masculine un-friendliness the young wife's wilful coquetry stood out in over-bold relief. Like Newfield eyes, Newfield tongues were censorious, and as the eyes watched, the tongues prated. At one time, in truth, it had been whispered that Steele Harriman's presence at the Ledge was the secret of George Round's absence from it. The gossip, however, died a natural death ; the censured intimacy waning, eventually, like a flame that had burned itself out. Nor had Isolde's arrival at the Ledge served to revive it.

True, on an evening shortly after the girl's advent, the young banker, clad in faultless evening attire, had descended at the Ledge-gate from the handsomest equipage of the Harriman stables, and left a couple of irreproachable cards for the ladies, absent at the time. This social duty done, and correctly done, he had rested on his laurels ; not, it must be confessed, without a chagrined surprise that he was allowed to rest upon them. He had felt convinced that in bringing her sister to the Ledge, Althea

had not been innocent of an ulterior motive connected with himself. As after-events seemed to cast a doubt upon the truth of this conviction, he felt not only chagrined, but what was far worse, humiliated. He had been at pains to evince his indifference, and Althea, in showing him that his pains were superfluous, had placed him at an ignominious, because ridiculous, disadvantage. While her apparent unconcern baffled, it did not deceive him, however. Althea's quiescence was always ominous. He likened it to the delusive calm that presages the storm.

Somewhat late on the evening of the semi-annual dance of the Newfield Shakespeare Club, the young banker was lounging in the vicinity of the club-house, through whose windows floated the strains of a gay dance-tune, when the Ledge carriage passed him and drew up at the club-house entrance. As Althea, followed by Isolde, disappeared up the long stairway, a sudden whim seized him to follow. He had ridden out to the mine-district that afternoon, dressed for a descent into one of the subterranean drifts of an abandoned mine, and had dined at the hotel on his way back, in the same rough costume. He looked himself over, from his tweed jacket buttoned over a flannel shirt, to the top-boots whose vamps still bore testimony to the sand and soil through which he had passed. He flicked them with his handkerchief, and then, flinging away his cigar, strode up the club-stairs. His indifference to the Eastern girl's opinion of his attire, his independence, his open defiance of it, seemed to him, in that moment of resolution, a proud and manly thing.

The scene of the dance was the assembly-room of a literary and social association known as the Newfield Shakespeare Club—a large square apartment which, with its ante-rooms, occupied the third floor of the Newfield

Club-house, recently erected and opened by unscrupulous speculators for the demoralization of masculine New-fielders, according to the most insidious and seductive methods of Eastern precedents. The café and bar of the first floor were supplemented, on the second, by card, billiard, and reading-rooms, luxurious in appointments, and alluring alike to the bachelors and benedicts of the neighborhood. The opposition of the club members to the lease of any portion of the house to the Shakespeare Club, which was exclusively feminine in its constitution, had been both strong and bitter; nevertheless the opposed had won the day. The result was an unhappy one, the single stairway dividing the rival clubs not infrequently proving an insufficient barrier between the midnight reveller and his waiting better-half, upon whose exasperated ears snatches of song and laughter, floating from the floor below, smote only less provokingly than certain tell-tale fumes upon the feminine nostrils, which, like Job's war-horse, "scented from afar." Between the clubs there waged, in consequence, bitter and open war. The hatchet was buried for mutual benefit, however, on such festive social occasions as the present, when the members of both clubs were accustomed to meet in common truce. As a formal invitation affair, from which the uninvited majority were rigorously excluded, the Shakespeare Club Dance was looked upon as an important social event. All the invited accepted. All the uninvited resented the slight more or less actively, as opportunity permitted. The youthful representatives of the ostracized, indeed, furious at their exclusion from an entertainment which presupposed unlimited supplies of ice-cream, cake, and like luscious esculents, made their own opportunity; and gathering with tin pans, sticks, and fish-horns upon the sidewalk, pro-

ceeded to treat the club to such a deafening shiveree, as was nipped in the unmelodious bud only by persistent applications of the club-house hose. This little incident, however, only added to the general hilarity.

Upon the platform at the end of the hall stood the piano, beside which capered an enthusiastic violinist, whose arm was less active in marking the tempo of the dance-tune than were his head and legs. The floor was crowded with dancers. Round them sauntered a double file of promenaders, cutting off all view from the mature matrons ranged in rows around the room. One and all, these were garbed in their best black silks, and likewise (the association being inseparable), in irreproachable company-manners. Their facial expression was one of elegant placidity. Their lips wore a serene smile. Their lace-mitted or silk-gloved hands were neatly folded on their laps. The matronal necks were chastely veiled by wide lace collars, ornamented by miniature glass-coffins, enclosing ghastly daguerreotypes or lifeless locks of hair. The younger matrons were frisking through the dance. They belonged to a generation which is nothing if not progressive. Matrimony had added to, not taken from their "rights." In dress, in dash of manner, in dance, in chat, in flirtation, they cast the maidens, young and old, into deepest shade. Only the widows were their rivals. These trailed their weeds through the "Squares" with pensive coquetry. The coquetry was of the present; the pensiveness a tribute to the dear, but defunct past. The assertion that one live man is better than ten dead ones is a libel on human nature, which widowhood disproves. Ten live men, nay, ten times ten, are inadequate to fill the yawning vacuum left by one man dead !

As the young banker entered the hall, Isolde was tak-

ing her place in a set, smiling over her shoulder at a couple of importunate rivals for her future favor. Althea, the central figure of an attractive group standing by one of the windows, was superciliously overlooking the rest of the company through the lenses of an antique silver lorgnette. Her appearances in Newfield society were few and far between, and usually even these were repented as soon as made. To-night, however, she did not regret that she had come. She had contrived to enter the room with ex-Senator Rushing, of Nebraska, and as one of his distinguished party, was enabled to look down from a pleasing political and social eminence upon Newfield citizens. Moreover, with the exception of Mrs. Rushing, whose velvet robe, as she wore it, was a queenly garment—hers was by far the most elegant costume in the room. It was of soft gray cloth, ornamented by a Cleopatra girdle of antique silver; and her capote of silver filigree was bordered with violets. White, gray, black, purple, the mourning colors—these only had Althea permitted herself to wear since her husband's defection! She felt an artistic sense of satisfaction in confining herself to them. They were delicately suggestive of a penitential spirit. Moreover, they were surpassingly becoming.

As Steele made his way toward her, he surprised a flash of recognition in her eyes which belied her apparent unconsciousness of his approach. As he reached her, the press of promenaders suddenly separated her from her companions. He smiled at the opportune accident. Althea's little ruses still amused him.

"At last!" he said, as he took the hand which she yielded rather than offered him. "It has been a question of 'When shall we two meet again?' with us, of late."

"Yes?" queried Althea, languidly, as she readjusted her lorgnette. "A pleasant evening."

He had been prepared for her resentment, but not for her smiling indifference. He did not know how to take it. He shifted from foot to foot, glowering at her with discomfited eyes. Hang the woman; what did she mean? Months had elapsed since they had met; and she talked to him—she, to him—about the weather!

"Really it has not been half my fault," he began. "Bank matters have engrossed me, and—"

He had made the masculine mistake of accusing, in excusing himself. A woman forgives a man anything, everything, save the slight confessed. Her low laugh interrupted him. There was a note of insolent amusement in it, under which he flushed resentfully.

"Society in Newfield," she said, "is, thanks be for small favors, a collective noun. Heaven forbid that one should parse it in the singular! And Newfield society has been, alas!—er—social as usual. Until this moment I was not aware that the individual Newfielder had neglected me. How shall I punish him?"

How ruthlessly she had punished him already, his face told her.

Suddenly her careless smile changed to an expression even less flattering. Her lorgnette, lowered for a moment, was relifted.

"Really!" she exclaimed, when the scrutiny to which she had subjected him was ended.

He seized two chairs vacated at the moment, and drew them into a vacant corner. Not until he was seated by her side, did he betray that he had heard her.

"Really—what?" he asked then.

"Really worth an inventory. Collar, conspicuous for

its absence. Item, a becomming but inappropriate pea-jacket ; item, a picturesque flannel shirt ; item, a cowboy-belt, with dirk, pistol, and flask attachments. As a whole, not bad—for a masquerade. And what social assemblage is either more or less than a masquerade ?—though we seldom wear our masks quite frankly. Costume aside, your presence here is an unexpected honor. Newfield must have become a very abomination of desolation to have driven you to the Shakespeare Club, to escape it.”

“ Rather to seek it. I have not seen much of Newfield social life lately, and was inspired to renew the acquaintance. It looks about the same old thing,” he added. “ The Misses Hunter are still on the scent, I see ; and Mrs. and Miss Linnett still plume themselves and twitter away, in characteristic fashion. So the Rushings are down from Nebraska ? They come in honor of Bill’s handsome bride, of course ; but Newfield takes the honor to itself, and a local boom for Bill, financial and political, is assured. I don’t mind telling you that I wish the political flood-tide would dislodge his financial anchor. Without him the slow old ‘ National ’ could not stand against me. ‘ Talk of the devil ’—here he comes, with all his surrounding angels ! Mrs. Rushing, take my chair. Senator, how goes Nebraska ? Bill, I think I have not yet congratulated you. Words are inadequate to express my envy of his good fortune, Mrs. Rushing ; hence my delay.”

The bride smiled and blushed. The groom, a robust young man with an intellectual head and a soldierly carriage, looked proud and happy.

“ If this designing young woman had not decoyed me from the ranks of eligibles, Mrs. Rounds,” he said, “ Jack Holbrook should not be having things all his own way with your charming sister to-night.”

"It strikes me that my charming sister is having things all her own way," corrected Althea, with a gratified glance toward Isolde, besieged by admirers in the interlude of the dance.

"Mrs. Rounds's amendment is accepted," avowed Steele, with a bow in Isolde's direction. "Mrs. Rushing, will you not say as much in favor of my chair?"

"Traius forbid," remonstrated her husband. "Ours leaves in an hour, and she has yet to change her gown, and all that."

Mrs. Rushing confessed to the change of gown, but proclaimed the "all that" to be a libel. "We give a politic—why are you frowning, Dick?—of course I mean a political dinner, to-morrow night," she explained, "at which I hoped Nellie would keep me in countenance; but she cruelly refuses to return with us. She comes from Kansas, you know, and looks down on Nebraskan politics. The geographical fact that she should look up to them, goes for nothing with her. She reserves her attitude toward Colorado politics till Bill enters them."

"Is this woman the consort of a loyal citizen of the United States?" demanded the ex-Senator, with a tragical clutch at his hair.

"The Dis-united States, I insist," laughed Mrs. Rushing, making her adieux.

The happy party passed on. Althea's eyes followed them.

"Mrs. Rushing," she remarked, "is a typical American woman. No position she may attain will be too exalted for her. She would enter the White House with the same graceful self-possession with which she now makes her exit from Newfield's club-room. And speaking of the

White House, rumor says that the Rushing political possibilities are unbounded. What are they?"

Steele smiled at the womanly question. Evidently the instant elucidation of subtle political problems presented no more difficulty to her feminine mind than the enumeration of so many gilded buttons.

"O, they scarcely reach the White House yet, I think!" he answered. "But Rushing has brain as well as wealth, power as well as popularity. The Governorship will be his undoubtedly, if he consents to the nomination."

"If he consents?"

"He has other irons, golden ones, in the fire."

"He will sacrifice wealth to position."

"It is possible."

"It is certain. He is an American."

"Which, quite evidently, you are not."

"I? O, I am—a woman!"

The quadrille ended. As Isolde left the floor, escorted by a blond young man whose smiling blue eyes, like miniature heavens, beamed impartially on everything and everybody within their range of vision, Steele rose and made a feint of turning away, but Althea chose to detain him. She dropped her lorgnette, and before he could extricate it from entangling feminine draperies, the girl had reached them. She wore a Grecian gown of unrelieved white, and her hair, innocent of bang or crimp, was drawn back from her forehead in a simple Psyche knot. Every eye in the room was fixed upon her. She felt rather than heard, the criticisms that followed her.

"She hasn't a bit of style," decided Miss Milly Hunter, a dashing damsel whose forehead and temples, even to eyebrows and ears, were hidden by a mass of frizzes under which her sharp little eyes snapped like a watchful fer-

ret's. Her slight, active figure bristled with fluttering ribbons, reminding one of an animated May-pole. Her sister was her younger duplicate and echo.

"Not a bit of style," repeated Cilly.

"Nor manner!" languished Miss Caroline Linnett, to whom manner and affectation were synonymous. "And, as Ma says, manner is the hand marking on the social dial the degrees between the lady and the—the—"

"Tiger?" suggested a tall, lank, spectacled young man, by name Peter Jones, who was of a literary turn of mind.

"O, that sweet simplicity pose is considered quite the thing—when it is becoming!" subjoined Miss Hunter, in a tone which implied that the present case did not fulfil the condition.

"When it is becoming," echoed Cilly, with still more disparaging emphasis.

"It wouldn't become you, Milly," tittered a youth whose general callowness had drawn upon him the ignominious nickname of "Chicken."

"The simplicity, Mr. Impudence?" inquired Miss Hunter, tartly.

"No, the sweetness, Milly," retorted Miss Virginie Sharpe, a spinster, of whom more hereafter.

"Come over by me, Chicken," invited Miss Linnett, whom the literary Jones had deserted. "Miss Sharpe implies that your proximity sets Milly at a disadvantage."

"Girls, hear Carrie!" shrieked Susanna Tompson, a plain-faced young woman who completed the group. "She's telling Chicken that he's just too sweet for anything."

The group laughed uproariously.

Isolde's face, as she reached Althea, wore a slightly puz-

zled expression. Hitherto she had idealized Newfield's social aspect. To-night, for the first time, a doubt if her ideal was realized, presented itself. She resisted it loyally. It was her social inexperience, she told herself, that made her feel ill at ease, constrained, even embarrassed, in the presence of these gay and nimble-tongued youths and maidens. Her heaviness, not their lightness, was at fault. She smiled at a sally of the blue-eyed boy's beside her, but the smile did not deceive him. Behind it lurked a seriousness which he saw and misconceived.

"You are bored," he said, ruefully; "and I, thanks to you, am enjoying the evening so much. I suppose that our little affairs cannot be expected to amuse—you."

"Have you found it so difficult to amuse—me?" she asked with mischievous mimicry.

"O, no,—not that, of course;" he stammered, "but things of this sort—social things, you know—must be so different in the East. The West is not very well up, just yet, in frills and fixings."

"Mr. Holbrook is saying," she laughed to Althea, as they reached her, "that the West is not yet up, socially, in 'frills and fixings.' What are frills and fixings, Althea?"

"Jack is a bad boy," evaded Althea. "The West is up in everything. Real-estate interests 'oblige.' By the way, Isolde, of course you know Mr. Harriman? No? Then you yourself are unknown. That is the only solution."

"Flattering to which of us, Miss Sterling?" asked Steele, as he bowed. He looked at her admiringly. The lamplight, garish upon others, seemed to shed a softer light as it mingled with her golden-brown hair, and vivid, yet delicate blond tints. Her eyes, bright with excite-

ment, suddenly softened as they met his; then shyly veiled themselves in their white lids. He noticed that her lashes were long and thick, with tips that curled coquettishly upward, casting a semicircular shadow upon her soft young cheeks. Her hand stole into his. He clasped it the more warmly, because he had not invited it. It had come of her own will.

"Mr. Harriman is not quite a stranger to me," she began. The shy flush in her cheeks deepened. Just at that instant the piano and violin resumed the shrill-voiced contest which a merciful truce had hushed, temporarily. Her gentle voice was rendered inaudible. With a little shrug and smile she turned away and took a seat beside Althea.

He followed her with a secret imprecation upon the inopportune fortissimos which had silenced her impulsive words. Why was not he quite a stranger to her, he wondered. She must be either very simple or very guileful, to make such an admission. Guileful? Her shy soft eyes, her pure sweet face, shamed the suspicion. His eyes wandered to her white gown, falling in graceful folds from throat to feet. Then, involuntarily, they sought his own rough habit. The contrast struck him almost painfully. For the second time he cursed his folly. The violin scraped into a waltz-tune, and the piano cackled after it. With an amused sense of the incongruity of the thing, he asked her for the waltz.

Newfield feet had not yet mastered the subtleties of the waltz-reverse, and the couples who had not come to open grief were bobbing about in an out-of-step manner, or breaking at will into polka or galop, heedless of the music's tune and time. As Steele and Isolde made a circuit of the hall, in the long, sliding, swaying step of the

dancer born and bred, the attention of the company was concentrated upon them. Behind her lorgnette Althea smiled at the general verdict. It was, that they made a handsome couple.

As the waltz ended, Isolde returned, flushed and smiling.

"I have never been to a real dance before," she admitted. "Do I betray the novice I am, Althea?"

"Ask Mr. Harriman," replied Althea, with a daring look Harrimanward.

"Are you really a novice?" he asked. "But yes, you must be, since you call this 'a real dance!'"

"But is it not a real dance?"

"That last waltz was—for me!"

"Say thank you, Isolde," prompted Althea. "You could not suspect it, but that last remark was intended for a compliment."

"Then its kind intention was quite fulfilled, Althea," replied the girl, gently. "Thank you, Mr. Harriman. And now please answer my question."

"As to the real dance? Frankly, then, Miss Sterling, while unwaxed floors, crack-voiced fiddles, romping reels and heels, and men in miners' dress—I mean undress—are still unostracized, I fear that Newfield cannot show you 'a real dance.' But possibly it has its equivalents."

"In its dancers?" queried Althea, innocently.

"In its——"

"SUPPER," roared a stentorian voice.

"Answered, Mrs. Rounds," laughed Steele. "And now, may I not have the pleasure of your company and Miss Sterling's at my table? We clubmen have our private nooks, you know, which even the Shakespeare Club may not invade uninvited."

"Go, Isolde!" acquiesced Althea, after a moment of elaborate hesitation. "I will follow when I have spoken to Mrs. Dumond, the club president, who is gesticulating to me in the most appealing manner."

She disappeared in the crowd as she spoke. Isolde looked after her blankly. With a smile Steele offered his arm. As she took it he caught a whiff of fragrance so faint as to be rather a sweet suggestion than a perceptible odor. Always thereafter the memory of that fragrance was associated with her in his thoughts. It was not a sensuous memory. Even in that first hour of acquaintance, while the girl was still virtually unknown to him, it impressed him as the fragrance exhaled from a pure young spirit, shut, like the golden heart of the lily in its sweet white petals, in correspondingly pure young flesh.

The crowd swept them on. It surged down the long stairs in a noisy torrent. Girls pressed close to the escorts who, in rural reversal of matters, were hanging on their arms. A few young men straddled the baluster and sped down, cheered by the spectators. A challenge was sent out for a girl to follow suit, a kiss from the man of her choice being proposed as her reward. The crowd waited. Suddenly a girl sprung from the upper stair, and mounting the baluster, flashed down the flight before her intention was realized. A roar of laughter rose from the men. The women tittered more or less indulgently. From the lower landing came the noise of a playful scuffle, followed by a long, loud, sibilant sound, at which Isolde flushed up to her small ears, and looked startled.

"Three cheers for Milly Hunter!" hurrahed the crowd, surging into the supper-room.

A double row of long tables occupied the centre of the

room. Smaller tables were ranged against the wall. To one of these, set in the alcove of an open window, the young banker led Isolde. She took her seat in silence, and turned her face to the night. In truth, she was somewhat embarrassed. She had been unprepared for such a riotous scene as she had witnessed. He scanned her averted face with gloomy eyes.

“Your initiation into Newfield society cannot be called propitious, Miss Sterling, he said. “You will not wish to repeat the experience.”

She divined his humiliation, and with the fine instinct of a lady sought to assuage it.

“Indeed I shall wish to repeat it soon, and very often,” she answered brightly. “There is a butterfly-instinct in us all, do you not think? and I—I have always been a caterpillar. Now that my wings have broken from the chrysalis, I feel impelled to plume them, to open them, to flutter them, to fly !”

“To fly away, I can well believe.”

“No, if to fly away were the cost of opening my wings, I would keep them shut forever.”

He stared at her in amazement. She met his gaze with frank, unconscious eyes. An hour earlier he had questioned if she were guileful. He could no longer doubt her simplicity. Like Druce, he found it difficult to realize that she was Althea’s sister. Of simplicity, at least, Althea could not be accused. Even as he smiled at the thought, Althea appeared, sailing triumphantly toward the little table, with old John Harriman in her wake. The summons of the club president had been her little fiction. She had caught sight of John Harriman, hesitating in the doorway, and thereupon had set about his capture in circuitous fashion, for her own inscrutable ends. She smiled

as sweetly, seating herself, as if she did not know that the young banker was secretly execrating her officiousness. Not that he was ashamed of his simple old father—on the contrary, he gloried in him ; but in this first hour of their acquaintance he would have preferred to impress himself upon the Eastern girl's consciousness, independent of all local associations. His greeting, however, betrayed no disappointment.

“Here, father !” he said cordially, resigning his seat, and passing to the foot of the table.

“Quite a family party, I declare,” remarked Althea. Then she laughed at the audaciousness of her speech. Steele glanced at Isolde. She was smiling at his father, who was cordially shaking both her hands. The old man looked radiant.

“This here's a sight fur old eyes,” he was saying. “I was young onct mysel', an' th' sight o' young folkses' doin's sorter brings it all back. When an old man sech as me has a grow'd up son like my son Steele here, he lives life all over again in th' youth born o' him. Some day, when ye've sons o' yer own, ye'll know how 'tis, my dear.”

“Your son Steele is a local institution, Mr. Harriman,” exclaimed Althea, rushing to the rescue. “Really I do not know what Newfield would do without him.”

“He's my dear boy,” assented the old man, beaming with happy pride. “My dear boy !”

“Keep him yours,” advised wily Althea. “Beware of the enticements of any designing petticoat. Marriage affects man as England does ale. It makes him 'alf and 'alf.'”

John Harriman did not smile.

“My son Steele's a good boy now, Mis' Rounds,” he

said, "but it'll take a woman's soft little hand ter make him a good man. Th' Lord left it ter th' woman ter bring th' men-folks inter th' world, an' I sorter reason as how th' job's jest left in her hands till she's see'd 'em through it. My son Steele 'll find nuthin' sweeter'r nor preciouser in life than th' little woman as 'll some day love him ; an' he can't do no better'r, before God nor man, than ter jest be worthy o' her."

"O, the dear old man!" murmured Isolde to Althea.

"O, you dear little fool!" mimicked Althea, in a responsive whisper.

Supper was being served at the long tables. Althea lifted her lorgnette and surveyed the dishes.

"Canned oysters, native wines, uneatable sandwiches, and melted ice-cream!" she announced, with a rueful grimace. "Why was I tempted to stay?"

"That is the bill-of-fare of the Shakespeare Club, Mrs. Rounds," said Steele. "We are with, but not of it."

Althea, who was a bit of an epicure, brightened visibly.

"I know!" she cried. "You are going to give us a sip of champagne from your private stock. Yes, here it is, and a delicious mayonnaise with it. How did you manage it, you prince of hosts? Pop! that is dry Pommery. Domestic wines never pop, they only fizzle—characteristic, rather, of the national spirit."

"Do you like champagne, Miss Sterling?" Steele asked as he filled her glass.

"I love to see it work," she said, lifting the long-stemmed glass to the light. "Its sparkles seem so full of life and youth and brightness. It is too pretty to drink, at first; and after, one does not care for it. In honor of the Shakespeare Club, I think the moral must be that the tide not 'taken at the flood'—etc."

"O, but Mr. Harriman always does take the tide at the flood, my dear!" reminded Althea, whom the champagne had made gracious. "For instance, the Newfield Bank."

"That there's th' bank!" ejaculated the proud old father, emphasizing the words with a blow of his clenched fist on the table.

The other small tables, with few exceptions, were occupied by decorous family parties. At the main tables, however, where the younger and gayer guests had congregated, the merriment was becoming riotous. Loud voices and louder laughter rang from them. Shrill feminine giggles staccatoed masculine guffaws. At one of the tables a young man rose, glass in hand, to make a speech. Fruit, bread, and other esculents were thrown at him, and the glass, dashed from his hand, fell and broke upon the floor. At the next table the centre-piece of bonbons was roughly demolished, and the bonbons were snapped with laughs and shrieks, amidst noisy nut-crackings, and boisterous cries of "Philopena." Althea put her hands to her ears.

"That Hunter girl ought to be—married!" she exclaimed, a moment later. "Look at her now."

Milly was standing upon her chair, her head adorned by a bright green paper cap, to whose high-peaked crown a frolicsome youth had surreptitiously applied a match. As the flames neared her head, she gave a piercing shriek, and tearing off the blazing cap flung it upon the table. There was a feminine stampede, followed by a crash and sizzle, as the fire was extinguished under a jug of water pitched from an adjacent table.

The apology for the scene, with which Steele turned to Isolde, was unspoken. She had drawn aside the curtain and was leaning toward the window, her dreamful eyes

fixed on the outer darkness. Althea's mention of the Newfield Bank, old John Harriman's beaming face, the ringing voice, the handsome magnetic presence of the young banker—all recalled to her the scene of the bank-opening. Once more she heard his appealing words, once more her soul responded. Impulsively she turned to him. The words that had been on her lips earlier in the evening, were now spoken.

“Speaking of your bank,” she said, “I was present at your inauguration. It was a coronation, and the king's speech was royal! Ever since, I have been wishing to congratulate you.”

The young man smiled. For more than one reason he was well pleased. The girl's words, in themselves gratifying, solved the riddle of the earlier evening. He knew now why she had said that he was not a stranger to her. He suspected that he was even less a stranger to her than she acknowledged.

“I am indeed a king,” he whispered, as they rose from the table, “since your words have crowned me. To wear the crown royally shall be my endeavor—if I may wear it—for your sake.”

She blushed, and turned her face to the window. Althea and his father had passed ahead. He stepped over the sill, and without a word extended his hands. After an instant's hesitation she followed him. A turn in the veranda commanded a view of the mountains, from which the breeze blew freshly. He took her wrap from her arm and folded it about her.

“You will like it out here,” he asserted. “In there we were on the stage, in the glare of the footlights. Here, behind the scenes, our parts played and the curtain rung down, we can be our real selves. And the real self is al-

ways the best self, is it not, Miss Sterling? Poor old human nature is not such a bad lot, after all."

"Against whom are you defending it?" she asked.

"Not against you, certainly. You idealize it, of course."

"I do not admit the 'of course,' Mr. Harriman!"

"Nor the ideals?"

"Ah, that depends!"

He accepted the evasion, liking her the better for it. She was not as transparent as he had supposed. Even her simplicities were not without an instinctive subtle reserve born of vestal pride and purity. Over the night swayed a waltz-strain. The leaves of the cottonwoods rustled like fairy-feet pattering in time to it. The massive shadow of the range, overhanging the starlit prairie like a dark phantom, swayed like a living presence, as the nether grass rippled in the breeze gentle of passage as an angel's unseen wing.

"It is beautiful!" he assented, in answer to her delighted exclamation. "Even I, to whom the scene in all its aspects is an old, old story, am not insensible to its spell. The eternal fascination of the mountains lies alike, I think, in their strength and their repose. They are Nature's counterpoise for human weakness and unrest. We have distanced many a restless mood, my mare Lady-bird and I, in a midnight gallop through the hush and darkness. Can you fancy the dash from a sleepless bed into the saddle, the wild gallop in face of the night-wind, its hiss mingling with the muffled thud of gallant hoofs speeding on, on, till the great crags close around one like a god's strong arms? For an hour the cramp and suffocation of finite individual existence are forgotten. One draws breath: the race of life is ended, the goal attained! The hour passes with the midnight, but it leaves its mark

behind it. One is no longer a mere finite unit, but an integral part of the infinite universal whole."

"Isolde!" called Althea from the window, "I have been searching everywhere for you. Are you not ready for 'home, sweet home,' you moonstruck child?"

"Quite ready, Althea," she answered. Nevertheless she lingered for a moment. In that moment he took her hand, and held it in both his own.

"You are going to your prayers," he said, in a wistful voice, "and to your white, white dreams. Good-night."

She did not answer him in words, but her lifted eyes were eloquent. As he followed her to the carriage he smiled—at himself as well as her.

Both Druce and Dr. Keene had been attentive observers of the little party in the supper-room alcove. When the dancing was resumed, the doctor, who in flagrant disregard of professional principles, had upset his digestion, and consequently his temper, by indulgence in welsh rarebit and hard old ale, snatched his sombrero from its peg in the hallway, and seizing Druce's arm, dragged him down the stairs, heedless of the young minister's protests against such unceremonious departure.

"Ceremony be hanged," ejaculated the doctor, loosing his hold as they reached the street. "What conventional obligations shall be imposed by a society which tolerates such an asinine absurdity as a Shakespeare Club Dance? Heels against heads it is, indeed—or would be, were there any heads in the club save blockheads! The association of Marmaduke Sterling's daughter with such a scene is worse than folly. Althea Rounds ought to be horsewhipped for suffering it."

"Miss Sterling seemed to be enjoying the evening," remarked Druce, mischievously.

"Enjoying it?" fumed the doctor. "That shows how far your ministerial eyes see over a prayer-book. She was shy, dazed, distressed by her incongruous surroundings, till that son of Old Harry changed the aspect of things by his mere appearance. He is a splendid specimen of the human male animal," he admitted, grudgingly; "strong and beautiful, and with the voice of the angel Israfel—dash him!"

"Israfel?"

"No, Harriman—though, Hades knows, he is dashing enough already! He took that poor little girl by storm. She could scarcely take her fascinated eyes from him. He was doing the sentimental beautifully, and she swallowed the sham for the divinest truth. He saw her innocent credulity, and judged her by it; but he will find out his mistake. Her siege will be no easy one, even for him. She will retreat the further into her vestal shrine the nearer the violator approaches."

"Doctor," said Druce, shyly, "I beg your pardon if I speak intrusively, but you have such a tender heart for women, you should have a daughter of your own to guide and watch over. It is a pity that you have not married."

There was a moment's silence. From the wind-stirred cottonwoods the dews plashed to the ground with the sound of falling tears. The doctor's voice, as he answered, harmonized with them.

"My boy," he said, "in every lonely man's and woman's life there is a pathetic story, not necessarily told to its end—sometimes but a mere suggestion; yet traced on the heart with the life-blood of youth, graven on the face by bitter, secret tears shed in loneliness, in yearning, in

heartache always, in heartbreak often. Forty years ago I called mine heartbreak. Life has taught me, since, that the man's heart gets no further than the ache ; the break is left for the woman's."

They had reached the parsonage. Without a farewell look or word the old man strode on. Turning into the gate Druce rested his arms on its low, white post, and watched him out of sight. Then his eyes lifted to the high, still, starlit skies.

"My God! my God!" he murmured. "Then the tears, the heartache, the heartbreak, are the common lot. None escape it. None."

Over the heavens passed a sudden cloud. The shining stars were shadowed. In the darkened waste before him the young minister saw a vision,—Gethsemane, its lonely Figure prostrate in the Agony, the mute Eyes, eloquent of pain and yearning unappeasable, fixed on Peter, His disciple, who in the distance slept. A sob, the first, last plaint, reproach, of His patient Passion, broke from His anguished Heart.

"Could you not watch one hour with Me?"
Loneliness, loneliness,—the agony of God and man !

CHAPTER VI.

ACROSS THE RUBICON.

The Ledge was a large white house which impressed one at first sight as having been built on the instalment plan. Nor did this appearance belie the truth. In the pioneer days of the West, George Rounds, senior, had lifted on its site, first his tent, then a rude pine-cabin, and later, in more prosperous years, a small white cottage, to which ell and story were added thereafter, as need or whim suggested. In the hands of his only son, Althea's husband, the house was transformed, as far as the transformation-power of paint and upholstery extended, but the original structure remained unaltered.

Althea mourned over its winding stairways, its odd-shaped rooms, and its omnipresent extensions; but Isolde rejoiced in the rambling halls with their shadowy recesses, in the nooks and corners of the quaint chambers, and in the deep windows jutting in all directions, and commanding equally fine views of the pine-woods, olive-amber in the sunshine, of the prairie sweeping like a grass-waved, flower-fleeted sea, and of the purple-misted mountains, whose jagged ledges stretching like giant-arms in the direction of the house, gave it its name. In fact, Isolde rejoiced in everything. There was nothing in her new life that did not delight her. It held one all-pervading, imperishable charm—its contrast to the old.

The season was an early one. Tiny white daisies and blue anemones having budded out prematurely, declined to be frightened back to cover by the occasional chill winds sweeping back like farewell messages from the departing winter; and white field-lilies, following them in acolyth-file, summoned with breeze-swayed fragrant censers all their flowery kin. Soon the land was one chameleon bed of bloom, whose every bewildering tint was reflected in the overhanging mirror of skies; and neither bird nor bee held gayer carnival than Isolde. She was up with the larks in the dewy, fresh, spring mornings, twittering to the swallows that fluttered by her window, trilling to the thrushes singing in shadow of the cottonwoods, warbling her own little lay of life and youth and gladness meanwhile, her voice but the echo of her singing heart. She looked across the sunshine and wondered that she had never before realized what a beautiful world she lived in, what a perfect thing life was. She made sweet little songs, spontaneous as the songs of the thrushes, and sung them wandering knee-deep in the flowered grasses; quaint little prayers, unorthodox as the matins of the swallows, and said them kneeling in God's open fane. She took her little cousin Gaylord's hands in hers, and danced about with him in wild, wide, merry circles, shouting like a child for very joy of living—a joy as open and luminous for any eye to read as the young spring sun shining on the prairie.

"It makes me glad to look at her," said Druce to Dr. Keene, as they walked back together from a call at the Ledge.

"Why," queried the doctor, whose responses defied all rules of polite conversation, "why is joy so often more pathetic than pain?"

The reverend Druce gave it up. The doctor worked out the problem in thoughtful silence.

She took long, delightful drives over the prairie ; half-day canters through the pine-woods whose narrow paths, winding in and out their dark recesses, brought her at last to the base of the mountains, grassed and flowered on their foothills, snow-crowned on their heights. She made friends of the farm-hands working in the road-side fields, and of the women and children living in the little cabins of the mining settlement. Not infrequently she chanced to meet the laughing, blue-eyed young farmer she had favored at the club dance, who rode back with her to the Ledge. Before her awakening human interests her old visionary dreams and fancies vanished like starlight before the sun. She no longer wrote ; she lived. Her letters were bubbling over with such exuberant spirits that her mother read and re-read them, finding it difficult to recognize her pale, quiet, dreamful Isolde, in the wild, merry madcap whose dancing eyes and glowing face laughed at her from every line. And indeed the girl did not quite recognize herself. Spiritually and physically there was a change. In truth she was maturing, soul and body, as naturally as the hothouse-bud matures, transplanted to God's free soil. The luminousness of the spring sunbeams, the warm virginal glow of the spring bloom, were on her face ; the reflection not only of the spring without but of the spring within—the spring of life, called Youth !

With the dance of the Shakespeare Club the season of Newfield's formal social entertainments virtually closed ; a series of informal out-of-door merrymakings succeeding them. During the day there were picnics in the woods or by the river, or excursions to distant ranch or camp or

farmhouse ; in the evening, riding or driving parties, and gatherings of gay young folks on twilight lawns, for tennis or croquet, followed, as night deepened, by impromptu dances on piazzas, or in barns lighted by dim lanterns, or perhaps only by the starlight streaming in through the open doors. The Ledge, since Isolde's advent, had become one of the favorite meeting-places of these sociable young people. Althea alone had not been popular enough to attract many informal callers, for which she had been wont to thank her stars. There was a mystery about her which Newfield resented, because it failed to solve it. "You are ice and fire," Steele Harriman had said to her, early in their acquaintance. "I see the ice, I feel the fire!" and though many had felt it with him, only he had dared the words. That Althea had intended him to feel it, he did not suspect at the time. No man reads a woman quite through and through. To the frankest page she holds him, there is always a reserve.

Since their parting on the club-house piazza on the night of the dance, Isolde and the young banker had not met. His father, however, almost nightly represented him at the Ledge. He had taken a fancy to Isolde at the club-supper, and had haunted her since, with the shame-faced fidelity of a shy, but loving child.

"She sorter minds me o' mother!" he confided to Althea, one evening, explaining his sudden devotion to the Ledge. "She's got a way wi' her, an' a look, soft an' gentle an' lovin'-like, as is jest mother over again. An' ye never know'd mother, Mis' Rounds? Wal, now!"

"Law me!" his fellow-caller, Mrs. Holbrook, ejaculated in Althea's ear ; "if ever woman led a man by the nose, Winifred Steele did John Harriman. She warn't any great things as ever I see, an' she carried on flighty enough

before she made her market. She warn't nuthin' to boast of as a church-member, nuther, but went flitterin' about, hither an' yon, with no hold nowheres. But he allers held as how the sun riz and set on her, an' none dared say to the differ. If only other husbands was like him!" sighed Mrs. Holbrook, reproachfully shaking her head at her disconcerted spouse, who twirled his thumbs in protest; "but law me, they ain't, they ain't!"

Old John Harriman, needless to say, did not overhear this whisper. Had he heard it, he would not have understood it. "Mother" was, as indeed she always had been in his eyes, a heavenly angel. Earth could not sully, because it could not reach, her pure white wings.

Blue-eyed Jack arrived as his parents departed. "They are going to make a call—and so am I!" he explained, radiantly. "Miss Sterling, I am always making a call, nowadays, and thereby hangs a tale."

"Do not tell it—yet, Jack," warned Althea.

Isolde laughed with them, in innocent unconsciousness of the innuendo. Why she laughed she did not think to ask herself. Life, of late, was one long laugh to her. Old John Harriman smiled in sympathy.

"Jest ye two go on sparkin', same's if I warn't here," he entreated. "Let young folkses be young folkses 's my motto! Us old people's hed our day, eh, Mis' Rounds?"

Althea had the making of a modern fashionable woman in her, and considered not only that her day was not over, but that, her marriage notwithstanding, it had not yet begun. Her response was somewhat curt, in consequence. Jack hurled himself into the breach.

"Someone has said that 'only the old know how to be young,'" he quoted. "Mr. Harriman, we appeal to you to share with us your secret of eternal youth."

"Th' secret o' youth is—love," answered the old man, his eyes fixed on a vision of "mother."

"Love? Hurrah! I am young forever!" shouted Jack, boyishly tossing up his cap and catching it again, darting an eloquent glance at Isolde during the manœuvre.

"And happiness, do you not think, Mr. Harriman?" added Isolde. "One feels so young when one is happy. At least I do!"

"But love presupposes happiness. O, do admit it, Miss Sterling!" pleaded Jack. "If it does not—'Alas, poor Yorick!'"

He struck an attitude of such woe-begone dejection that she could not but smile, though she answered earnestly.

"I read somewhere," she said, "that love and pain are synonyms. But I suppose this can be true only of the selfish love that fails to forget self in others."

"In another, you mean, Isolde," corrected Althea. "Your plural sounds like Mormonism."

"But I mean my plural," the girl insisted, "and so, I am sure, did Mr. Harriman. Love of God and of all God's creation is the love of which I spoke. He was not thinking of the circumscribed love of two."

"I was," confessed Jack, impenitently.

"You are an overgrown baby," retorted Isolde. "You could not think a serious thought if you tried."

"Could I not?" he asked, with sudden earnestness.

There was a moment's silence. The twilight of earth had deepened into night; the darkness of heaven brightened into stars. From the distance sounded the thud of hoofs. Old John Harriman looked eagerly toward the cross-roads.

"Them's Ladybird's hoofs," he said. "I'd know 'em

in a herd o' steer. My son Steele's a-comin'. He'd hev come long before, only that he's be'n diggin' away like a miner, day an' night. He's bound ter make th' bank a success, an' he's jest doin' it. It's far an' away ahead already of any private bank 'twixt here an' 'Frisco!"

Jack rose.

"I must tear myself away," he said. "Mother gave me some orders for town. I was hoping that Miss Sterling would drive in with me—but of course, if Harriman is coming—"

"No commission for me, I suppose, Mrs. Rounds?" he asked, as he made his adieux.

"Yes," whispered Althea, in quick assent. "Take Isolde as far as the gate with you, and show her that you can be serious. I wish you to leave a good impression."

"I'll try," he said, with a fervently grateful glance. He did not know that her kindness was due to her desire that the young banker should be greeted, as he reached the Ledge, by the sight of Isolde and Jack, hand in hand together.

John Harriman had not been mistaken. His son had just reached the cross-roads. There he halted and hesitated. The temptation to turn to the Ledge was strong, and for this very reason he took a proud pleasure in resisting it.

Of a sudden, however, his hesitation ended. He had caught sight of the two figures sauntering down the Ledge path, and even in the semi-darkness recognized them. With a muttered exclamation he gave Ladybird her head. As he galloped nearer he saw Jack take Isolde's hand. She turned a flushed, shyly smiling face to greet him as he dismounted. The flush was not for

Jack, but he did not know it. He saluted both somewhat gravely, and lingered over the act of hitching Ladybird. When he reached the gate Jack was driving down the road, and Isolde was alone.

She was looking very fair and girlish in her simple gown, whose folds followed the graceful curves of her figure. He bared his head as he reached her, but did not take her hand. He resented, with a boyish, unreasonable bitterness, Jack's clasp of it.

"My father is here, I believe?" he asked.

She answered gently, but with a sudden keen sense of disappointment. In the little hour in which this man and she had met and parted, the possibility had suggested itself of a sweeter, more intimate companionship than life had yet opened to her. But the possibility had not yet been, and now in his averted eyes and indifferent voice she seemed to read that it would never be fulfilled. She was conscious less of her disappointment than of its effect. She felt suddenly chilled, reserved, repellent as well as repelled. It was a strange mood for gentle Isolde. The young man looked at her tell-tale face curiously. He missed a certain simple joyousness which had been in it when she greeted him. Perhaps it had followed Jack Holbrook down the star-lit road, he told himself, savagely. Suddenly their eyes met and held each other. Through their clear windows soul questioned soul, and albeit mutely, the answer came. In that brief instant of silent communion, their acquaintance grew as it could not have grown in months of conventional converse. A Rubicon had been passed, but its name, its import, they knew not. Toward the goal that lay beyond it they pressed with heedless feet.

"A new moon, good people," announced Althea, break-

ing the silence that had fallen on them. "When I was a girl I used to wish on every new moon for a lover. After many moons he came. The moral is—Isolde, I leave you to answer!"

The girl hesitated. Such flippant treatment of what to her unsophisticated heart seemed a hallowed subject, struck her as coarse, even revolting. She had forgotten, for the moment, to what unhappy end Althea's love-episode had tended, or her distress would have been greater, but Althea believed her to be thinking of it, and felt resentfully intent upon torturing her.

"The moral, my dear," she insisted.

Steele hastened to her relief.

"You are behind the times, Mrs. Rounds," he said, "in spite of that—er—diminutive telescope through which you struck awe into the heart of Newfield, at the club dance. The moral is no longer for the Young Person. She discards it."

"In favor of the immoral?" asked Althea. "I call that hard on Isolde."

"Upon second thoughts I retract the title," he said. "It is not appropriate. Miss Sterling is not at all representative of the Young Person."

"You are not representative of the Young Person, Isolde," laughed Althea. "The logical corollary is too unflattering to put into words. The slur upon your morals might be forgiven: the slur upon your-youth, never, as you are a woman!"

"Miss Sterling understands me," said Steele, with a significant look into the shy eyes smiling up at him.

"If she does," retorted Althea, sharply, "she understands more than the Young Person should."

He did not answer in words, but across the darkness

their eyes met. As he looked away, at last, Althea changed the subject.

The crescent moon was rising. It shed no light as yet, but shone with concentrated radiance within its dark sky-setting. Its line was perpendicular—it held no rain, John Harriman said; and close beside it shone the watchful star which is ever faithful in its vigil. Isolde's eyes were fixed upon it. Her woman's heart seemed to read its mission of patient faith and love and service. Steele, looking into her uplifted eyes, lost himself for a moment in their blue depths. Were they blue, by the way, or violet, or only a deep blue-gray? And their soft luminousness—was it their natural light, or only the reflected glory of the vestal moon's white radiance?

"You look prayerful," he said to her, suddenly. "Are the stars, to your eyes, the 'little chinks of heaven' your fellow-poet calls them?"

"Surely you cannot mean to imply that Colorado is not 'high as heaven' itself?" she replied, mischievously.

"Ah! So the natives have been spinning their yarns of altitude, and you, a new-comer to Colorado, have breath enough left to laugh at them. Evidently, heights are your natural plane. And speaking of our rare atmosphere, Miss Sterling, do you know that its physical effects upon the unacclimated are not half as wonderful as the occasional spiritual phenomena exhibited in the born mountaineer? An incident came to my notice to-day which I hesitate to relate, it is so incredible, naturally considered. But you will consider it poetically, so I may venture to confide it."

A sudden impulse had seized him to show himself at his best to this pure-eyed girl, in whose presence, in spite of himself, he felt a reverence which no other woman had

evoked. He knew that the story he had to tell would touch her ; he knew that he could tell it well. He possessed an eloquence of voice which set off his eloquence of words as the music the lines of a song. He had taken off his hat, and his handsome head was outlined in relief against the vine-shadowed trellis. In his easy unconscious pose he suggested a gladiator at rest, his noble physique presenting the grace of passive power, which, to a feminine eye, is the most irresistible of all masculine attractions.

"In our county asylum," he began, "was a blind girl born of parents who emigrated from the southern ranges —mountaineers for generations back. A year ago her strength began to fail, and as death approached she grew more and more restless. She could not 'die without seeing it,' was her constant cry, though she never specified her soul's desire. A few hours before her death, which occurred some days ago, she awakened to sight, the poor blind eyes illumined by an ante-heavenly light. One expected to witness rapture at the sudden revelation, but her eyes betrayed only disappointment, yearning, distress. The sight of her mother's face caused her only a faint pleasure, the reflection of her own but passing interest. She was lifted to the window—it looked across the prairie to the town ; she only shook her head. At the further end of the ward was a western window, commanding a view of the mountains, towering that sunlit afternoon like gold-throned, purple-robed monarchs crowned with glistening snow. One glance, and her face was transfigured. It had been plain even to ugliness : it was suddenly beautiful with the glory of a triumphant soul. All at once the light faded from her eyes, the lids closed over. 'I have seen it,' she cried. And sunk back, dead ! "

"Poor creetur," murmured old John Harriman, "but

she's better'r off, better'r off! Wal, now! Ter think as she's wi' mother."

The little group sauntered down the path in silence. As Steele reached the gate his mare strained toward him, whinnying softly. She was a beautiful creature, powerful, but graceful as a small head, arched crest, clean limbs, and slanting shoulders could make her; roan in color, with sheeny, satiny hide.

"O you pet, you darling, you beauty!" cooed Isolde, caressing the soft nose gently rubbed against her.

"Would you not like to ride her, Isolde?" asked Althea.

The question, unsuspected by Isolde, was a challenge. Steele chose to accept it.

"Ladybird is not a lady's mount," he said, "but I have a bay, swift as the wind, gentle as a baby, which I shall be most happy to offer Miss Sterling—if I may."

"Certainly," tantalized Althea. "It is a man's privilege to 'offer.'"

"And a woman's to accept" laughed Isolde, veiling her blushing face in the mare's silky mane.

"Thank you, Miss Sterling," said Steele, a flash of gratification in his eyes. "Since you agree with me, I can afford to leave Mrs. Rounds to her theory that a woman's privilege is—to reject."

"Scarcely her privilege; only her wiser alternative!" retorted Althea, over her shoulder.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COST AND THE PAIN.

It was characteristic of the young banker that he did not hasten to claim the fulfilment of Isolde's promise. Possibly he claimed it the less promptly because in his heart of hearts he was conscious of impatience at the self-imposed delay. Nearly a fortnight had elapsed since his call at the Ledge, when he rode up to the gate at night-fall, leading a second mare, a small, sleek bay, by the rein.

Isolde met him as he dismounted, her hands full of sugar. Althea followed, carrying her gauntlets and riding-crop. The thought struck the young man that the respective burdens were appropriately apportioned. As she stood off, taking admiring note of the bay mare's points, he made a somewhat similar inventory of her own. He liked her trim dark habit with its suggestion of snowy linen at throat and wrists; the coquettish poise of the little derby on her fair head; her neat, high riding-boots, her soft tan gauntlets, her sturdy crop. Every graceful curve of her girlish figure was outlined by the severe, close-fitting habit, above which glowed her vivid face, like a warm-hued picture from a sombre frame. As her foot rested in his hand, he noticed the lithe spring of its ball from his palm, and the curve of the high arched instep. Handing her the rein, he caught a breath of the same sweet fragrance that he had noticed about her on the

night of the club-dance. Nothing escaped him; all pleased him. As they turned from the Ledge he threw an eloquent backward glance at Althea; but she did not see it. She was leaning on the gate, with her face toward them; but her eyes were fixed thoughtfully, almost sadly, on the ground.

The evening was one of the perfect evenings met in the West, at the season when, while the winter snows still linger on the mountains, spring, youthful on the hills, seems to mature in the valley, thrilled with the premonition of approaching passioned June. The breath of a recent shower was on the air, its dew-like drops still sparkling on the fresh young grass. In the east, the sapphire sky was darkening; the sun's red disc was sinking in the west. Over the mountains the night-mists curled and colored, brushed by the sunset's radiating wing. The gurgle of the Freshet waters blended with the murmur of the wind through the cottonwoods. From their half-built nests in the tree-tops piped the vespering birds of spring.

"How do you like her gait?" he asked, as they halted after a trial canter.

"It is perfect!" eulogized Isolde. "The saddle is like a cradle. And, by the way, what a handsome saddle it is! I seem to have a more secure seat than in Althea's."

"You like the third horn. It lessens the fatigue of a ride, and insures a firm seat. When you are an experienced horsewoman, however, you will not need it. Does the slipper-stirrup suit you? It is the safer style for a woman. In case of a throw, there is no danger of being dragged."

"I prefer to hear that there is no danger of a throw,"

she laughed. "I may as well confess it here and now, Mr. Harriman, physical courage is not my strong point."

"Suppose we test it by a race to the cross-roads? You are certain that everything is quite secure? Then, one, two, three, and—off!"

They galloped side by side over the level road. As the wind whistled by them, the air seemed filled with flashing crystals. Myriad sparks danced and coruscated before Isolde's eyes. Laughing and panting, with rose-red cheeks and glowing parted lips, she reached the goal, and wheeling her mare about, faced Ladybird, struggling against the check that held her a neck's length behind. As he rode up, Steele bared his head.

"Hail to the victor!" he said.

"Oh, but that was not a noble victory!" she protested. "You held Ladybird in."

"I never give her her head," he evaded. "She always feels the curb. Eh, old girl?" stroking her arched neck fondly.

The mare turned her head, and responded to the rare caress with limpid, loving eyes.

The silence of night had fallen, broken only by the regular thud of the mares' hoofs falling like muffled drum-beats on the ground. Into the sky flashed the sentinel stars, ranging for midnight muster. In the roadside-grass the locusts were chirping loudly, heralding, so says the legend, the summer's warm approach.

Of a sudden the hush was broken, not as the young man had proposed that his words should break it—but by the sound of hoofs speeding toward them, urged on by shouts and cheers. The road into which they had turned was hedged in by pine and brush. Its only open outlet lay a mile or more ahead, the one behind them being cut off

by their pursuers. As Ladybird pricked up her ears and began to champ on the bit, he suddenly caught the bay's rein, and urged both horses to a fierce gallop. A glance at Isolde's startled face and swaying form, however, as their speed increased, showed him that the wild pace could not be sustained. Altering his intention, he turned the mares' heads, facing about to meet the advancing riders. Visions of Indians, with warwhoop and tomahawk, of masked road-agents, armed with cocked revolvers, of riotous cowboys, bent on a night's wild spree, flitted before Isolde's mental eyes. Happily, her suspense was but brief. In a swirl of dust and babel of sound, the riders galloped up, proving to be the merry young people of the neighborhood, whose social custom it was, on evenings when no indoor pleasure claimed them, to ride to a common meeting-place, whence they set out in couples for a canter into the country. These parties, in spite of fine horse-flesh and splendid riding, presented to the Eastern eye a somewhat unique appearance. The men, as a rule, wore sombreros, and gaudy neck-scarfs with flying ends; the girls were partial to jerseys of brilliant colors, and to caps or hats of unconventional styles. Gold neck-chains hung with elaborate pendants were likewise prominent features of their toilets. Isolde's severely plain habit, indeed, was looked down upon by the native feminine eye—perhaps the more scornfully because the masculine eye proved prone to look up to it. Not the habit, however, but the girl inside the habit, was the attraction.

As the present party bore down upon them, hallooing a noisy greeting, Steele lifted his hand and waved them back imperatively. The spirited mares were almost beyond his control.

"Fools!" he exclaimed, angrily, "You seem to overlook the fact that I have a lady with me," he called out, riding toward them as they slackened their pace in obedience to his gesture.

"No, we overlooked the fact that the lady had you with her," retorted one of the leaders. "Miss Sterling is the attraction, not you, Harriman."

"Miss Sterling would prefer not to be ridden down, even as a token of admiration," he replied, surlily. He was annoyed not only that the girl had been startled, but also by the intrusion. He had encountered these parties before, under somewhat similar circumstances, and foresaw that the pleasure of his ride was at an end.

"I was not frightened," Isolde said, striving to assuage his resentment, "and they meant kindly. Please say nothing more; and I think you may trust me with my reins now. She seems quite quiet."

He had forgotten that he still held the bay's bridle, and released it with a word of apology. Milly Hunter rode to the front just in time to observe the little incident.

"In leading-strings already?" she asked, audaciously. "But the strings were in the wrong hands, weren't they? Take my advice, and don't be led by any man, Miss Sterling. The strings turn to chains in his hands."

"In *his* hands," emphasized her echo, from the rear.

Steele saw Isolde flush, and caught a gleam of indignant pride in her gentle eyes.

"Shut up, Milly," he said with familiar rudeness; "and do not let us interrupt your ride. Miss Sterling and I are not going your way."

"Of course not," rallied Milly's escort. "Who would go our way, in your place, Harriman?"

*"Life is fleeting, youth is brief,
Love is only a springtime leaf;
Bud of April, bloom of May,
Dead ere the Summer's first June day."*

As the rollicking voice died away, the party caught up the chorus.

*"Bud of April, bloom of May,
Pluck and wear, ere it fades away.
Ah! how fleeting, ah! how brief;
Love is only a springtime leaf."*

At another time the rude jests would not have annoyed the young man, but at the present moment, he resented them with disproportionate bitterness. Without a glance at the girl beside him, he knew instinctively that she was shrinking from him. His anger grew no less as Jack Holbrook came riding out of the ranks toward her. Happily his face was in shadow, or its tell-tale scowl would have evoked further witticism.

"I called at the Ledge, but Harriman had the advantage of me," Jack was saying to Isolde, as he saluted her. "On my way back I fell in with the party, but I am not enjoying it at all."

"No? Why not?" asked Isolde.

His boyish face flushed. He answered with averted eyes, lashing the roadside grass with his whip, as he spoke.

"O, I don't care for these romping parties any more!" he said. "I surmise I've outgrown them. I'm outgrowing everything that is not—one thing, nowadays."

“‘Everything that is not one thing,’ you incoherent boy !” she laughed, without a suspicion of his meaning. “And pray what is the one thing ?”

“May I really tell you, some time ?” he asked, eagerly, flushing up to his girlish blue eyes as he spoke.

Steele turned to Isolde.

“Perhaps we had better turn back,” he said. “I think you will not enjoy riding with the party. The mare will be restless.”

As the party rode on, Milly Hunter, wheeling about with a laugh, called to Jack, over her shoulder.

“Going to play gooseberry, Jack ?” she asked.

“Gooseberry, Jack ?” queried Cilly.

“Don’t be a spoil-sport, Jackie dear,” implored Miss Linnett. “Come back where you’ll be welcome.”

Isolde turned to him with a bright flush on her cheeks.

“Will you do me the favor to ride back with us ?” she asked.

He looked at Steele, and hesitated.

“I wish it,” she said.

Without a word he turned with her, followed by the laughs and jeers of the mischievous observers.

Steele stared straight before him with sullen eyes. The ride was spoiled for him, nevertheless he acknowledged that neither Isolde nor Jack was at fault. The blame lay with the brainless, malicious boors and fools behind them. Could they not see that this girl was different from them, unused to their coarse “chaff,” and outraged by it ? Would she judge him by his social associations ? Behind clenched teeth, he swore that she should not. The party had galloped out of sight. A road, a branch of the highway, trailed like a ribbon through the prairie toward them. As they reached it Jack halted, and lifted his hat.

"I think I must say good-evening here," he said. "I have some commissions for town, and it is getting late. If you are not engaged for to-morrow evening, Miss Sterling, I should like to take you for a spin behind my new sorrels."

"With great pleasure," accepted Isolde, cordially. "Thank you."

She looked after him as he rode away, nodding over her shoulder to him.

"He is not quite his usual bright self to-night," she said, as he rode out of sight. "I think he is such a dear boy, do not you?"

Steele's eyes twinkled.

"I did not think so a moment ago," he admitted, "but distance lends enchantment. He's not half a bad fellow —a mile away."

Her smile in response to his was somewhat constrained. She was not quite sure of the meaning his words were intended to convey to her. Gallant innuendoes from admiring young men were a novelty to her. She had not yet learned how to parry them.

"After all," he said, turning a sudden keen glance upon her, "he is not such a boy. He is six or seven and twenty. It is never safe to rely too much upon the boyishness of a young man."

"O, but he seems such a boy," she insisted, "always so light-hearted and happy! I cannot fancy him a man, taking life gravely and earnestly. I suppose his is what is called a 'sunny' disposition. All his days are golden days. A happy fate, is it not?"

"Very, while it lasts," he replied. "Unless I mistake, however, his golden days are numbered."

"O, why do you say that?"

"If I told you why, you would not forgive me. The case is one of circumstantial evidence, which you would refuse to accept as proof. Holbrook, by the way, is not a bad specimen of the native type of youth. But, of course, you know the type by this time, not only generally, but individually. One has to know everyone in this primitive social region."

"Primitive? Yes," she admitted, "since it has not yet outgrown the primal creed of universal human brotherhood, as taught by Christ."

"I bow to the rebuke, Miss Sterling."

"I was not presuming to rebuke you, Mr. Harriman. I simply spoke my thought. Your West, socially, is such a beautiful contrast to my East, where anyone outside of the little sphere of capitalized Society is left, socially speaking, in isolation. I speak, who know, because I was one of the isolated."

"By your own choice, of course," he said, somewhat embarrassed by her frankness.

"No, by Hobson's choice," she laughed, "but my isolation did not hurt me. Only now and then the suspicion came to me that something was lacking in my life—a sweet something, which it was sad and wrong that a young life should miss. What that sweet something was, your West revealed to me, when it opened my book of life at the page *Humana*."

He listened to her with increasing interest. Her simplicity at once amused and touched him. How charming her childish confessions were; how piquant, how pathetic! She was speaking of having missed something in her life. Of a sudden he felt an extraordinary, irrational impulse to cry out to her that up to this moment he, too, had missed something—that he must miss it forever, if she—if she—

his thought went no farther, but incomplete as it was, he saw that its betrayal in his face had startled her. She was suddenly self-conscious. He averted his eyes, and replied earnestly.

"Its social aspect aside," he said, "life in a great metropolis like New York must be an inspiration, a stimulant, an incentive; while country-life is a clog. In the one a man lives; in the other he only exists. Country-life is still-life; city-life, action; and it takes action, friction, competition, to develop human life to its highest and fullest extent. The mere atmosphere of the great city is stimulating. The great smoke-puffing chimneys, the immense factories swarming with human life, and pulsating like living creatures, with their mighty cogs and wheels; the rush of aerial traffic; the street-cars sweeping along their tracks; the carriages rolling over the pavements; the rattle of carts and wagons; the whistle and roar of engines speeding by with their living freight—above all, the mighty human concourse coming and going, crowding and jostling, meeting and passing by day and night—all act like a spur upon the human animal, and start him on the race! The race for the goal of Finance, the race for the goal of Politics—the rival powers that with more than autocratic pride, more than royal pomp and splendor, rule our American Republic of to-day. Politics sits the throne, but Finance holds the court and palace! The great financial enterprises of the day allure with dazzling, irresistible attraction. The splendid whir of Speculation's golden wheel draws one toward it impellently as the whirlpool draws the spar. It holds unlimited scope for energies, stimulation for lassitude, Nepenthe for unrest—action, excitement, risk. Politics for maturity!"

Finance, with its golden ensign, is the glittering god of youth!"

He waved his cap with an excited triumphant gesture. His eyes flashed, his voice rang out exultantly. Isolde sighed. A premonition had come to her girlish heart of the defeat and failure to which such wild ambition as this man avowed, was fore-doomed.

To the social isolation of her solitary young life she had confessed quite simply, not suspecting that the pain of it, which her dreamful soul had but dimly recognized, was fully comprehended by the young banker. A social need, formerly unrealized, but felt somewhat bitterly, of late—a need of sympathetic and congenial companionship, of refined social associations not exclusively masculine, explained, he now told himself, the disproportionate charm and influence which his intercourse with Isolde was gradually assuming. That he was attracted by her he could not but realize. Had she attracted him after the natural manner, as he miscalled it, of girls of other types, he would have yielded with the half-contemptuous pleasure with which men do yield to influences which touch the lowest, not the highest, in them. It was because she touched his highest that he resisted her spell. On the Saturday evening following his ride with her he took the "flyer" for Denver, there to "make a night of it," a fleshly tonic of which he felt in need. In fact, he made two nights and a day of it, and cursed himself for a fool at their end. A deeper plunge of the kind might have resulted as he desired, but when too late he realized that the surface-dip was a mistake. It intensified the fever it had been intended to calm. In characteristic defiance he turned back to the Ledge.

Formerly, the young banker's frequent visits to the

Ledge had evoked the general verdict that George Rounds was a fool. Now they evoked only the whisper that Althea Rounds was a clever woman. As she had once smiled her defiance of the first verdict, so she now smiled her indifference to the second. Not by little Newfield was Althea to be turned out of her elected way.

To do Althea justice, her way was not the openly match-making one that feminine Newfield suspected. To this, Steele Harriman's lowering brow bore frequent testimony. It was Althea's bitter delight to make his proud brow lower. She developed a perfect genius for assigning Isolde to Jack Holbrook, when both young men approached her on equal grounds; for recollecting hitherto unmentioned engagements, and hurrying off the girl to fulfil them, at any and every hour of the young banker's appearance. The little contradictions did no harm—perhaps they were intended to do none. They challenged both his vanity and the proud imperiousness of his despotic nature: they kept his interest on the *qui vive*, and were like narcotics to Isolde's unconsciously awakening sensitiveness. In spite of Althea's manœuvres, their acquaintance grew. Steele Harriman had sworn that it should grow.

As is inevitably the case when two congenial young persons are thrown much into each other's society, their intercourse became familiar, even intimate; their talk, personal. Not all at once, deliberately, but little by little, in impulsive slips and snatches, Steele told the girl his life—as far as he chose to tell it: of his childhood, free, untrammelled, in its primitive surroundings, as the flight of a young eaglet along the mountain-peaks; of his boyhood, daring, reckless, exuberant, a riotous revel of conscious life and youth and animal strength and spirits. He told her of his youth, of books, companions, ideals, of spirit-

ual forces that weakened with the mental, to grapple with the material ones leaping strong-limbed from the cradle of youthful, vigorous, healthful human years ; of the battles fought between soul and body, when physical Nature, Nature the Force, the Evolver ; Nature the Cause, the Effect—the Infinite Whole of which his individual human nature was but a finite unit part, cried to him, “ *I am soul, I am mind, I am body ! Of me all is conceived, of me brought forth ; to me all shall come back ! Of me is time : in me is eternity ! I am life, I am death ! I am the creator, I am the destroyer ! I am the beginning, I am the end !* ” He told her of the maturer years, when, the materialistic phase outlived, he had lost himself in the contemplation of human source and issue ; of life finite and infinite ; of its human brevity, its spiritual immortality ; of the riddle of existence, of the divine and human solutions ; of the doubt, the dark, the chaos that lay between. He told her of the four voices, wakening one by one to solve life’s questions for him ; the voices of Soul, and Mind, and Heart, and Body.

“ God,” cries the voice of the Soul, “ God Who was before us, God Who will be after us !

“ God the One, God the Only !

“ God the Creator, God the Life-Giver, God the Destroyer !

“ All save God is nothing ; and nothing is, save God !

“ To live for God, to die for God—this is life, this is death ; this is humanity, this is immortality !

“ For God, and God alone ! ” cries the Soul.

“ Lore ! ” cries the voice of the Mind. “ Lore, the resurrection of the past ; lore, the immortality of the present ; lore, the revelation of the future !

“Lore, the omniscience; lore, the omnipresence; lore, the eternal !

“All save lore is a myth ; all save lore is falsehood ; lore alone is reality ; lore alone is truth !

“Lore is the apocalypse of God, lore is the evidence of man !

“Lore is the solution of all, lore is the revealer of all !

“Lore is all,” cries the Mind.

“Life !” cries the voice of the Body. “Young, sweet, rapturous human life !

“The life of the flesh, the life of the blood, the life of the senses !

“There was nothing before life, there will be nothing after life ! Life is the beginning, life is the end !

“Drain all earth’s nectar, breathe all earth’s fragrance, hearken all earth’s song ! Satisfy the flesh with all sweet fleshly pleasures ; brim the blood with all sweet sensual human draughts !—this is the one life—this is the only life !

“Life ! life ! life !” cries the Body.

“Love !” cries the voice of the Heart.” Love the Divine, love the human, love the Divine-human !

“In love God created us, in love Christ redeemed us.

“In love we are begotten, in love we are brought forth !

“In human love’s successive stages—filial, fraternal, friendly, philanthropical, romantic, conjugal, parental, we live.

“In Divine Love, the first love, the last love, we die !

“Love is God ! Love is lore ! lore is life !

“Love ! Love ! Love !” cries the Heart.

And so, like four strong foes, they tilt at each other ; and the Heart stabs the Mind, and the Mind stabs the Soul, and the Soul stabs the Body, and the Body stabs all three !

He told her of a man's first conscious conception of the great struggling, striving human world ! Of the sense of expansion infinite almost to infinity, with which the realization of independent individuality, of personal responsibility, first comes ; of the first fruit of that revelation, the divine impulse—the human resolve, to be, to do, not as the lowest tempts, but as the highest inspires—to think, speak, act, like a new John, " giving evidence of the light." He told her of a young man's dreams of a life in a rarefied atmosphere far above the material plane of the mass ; consecrated to all high, noble, beautiful immaterial ends ; dreams of purification, atonement, regeneration—such dreams, alas, as come to all youth, and go from all, and leave behind only the bitterness of loss !

In return she had little to tell him of her simple life that he did not know already—little as might be told of the cloister-lily, sheltered from adverse winds, fostered by gentle hands, steeping its petals in the golden sunshine, storing in its chalice the fall of fresh young dews ; a little lonely, a little wistful, dreaming its flower-dreams from dawn to twilight, keeping its virgin-vigils by moon and star ; waiting its perfect bloom, wondering what its bloom shall bring it, knowing not its destiny within the chapel-shrine ! Nevertheless, he listened to the shy tale, rapturously. The loneliness, the wistfulness, the dreams, the waiting, the hope, the fear and wonder, were exquisite revelations of her maiden heart. If a shamed half-fearful suspicion of all she was revealing ever dawned upon her, he assuaged it by reciprocal confidence, and

spontaneously, freely, blissfully, both gave their best, and took !

The mutual confidence was fraught with mutual revelation. To Isolde it opened a new conception of masculine prowess, to see how Steele's mind grappled with all natural and human problems, daunted by no difficulties, acknowledging no defeat ; while to him it was baffling, almost incredible, to behold the elusive problems impervious to the cannon and shell of his masculine charge, vanish like wraiths before her sophisms, illogical, unpremised, and undemonstrated, but nevertheless soaring triumphantly on their feminine wings over his masculine Hills of Difficulty. Sometimes he laughed at her, and sometimes he sighed ; but most frequently they smiled together. The smile was so spontaneous that even Dr. Keene, watching the couple with anxious eyes, reflected it. Althea alone did not. In truth, Althea in those days was not a happy woman.

There is no more pathetic figure in this pathos-full world, than that of a woman whose past of sin or folly, refusing to be laid, confronts her like a haunting spirit, with mocking vengeful face. Thus Althea's past of folly confronted her now. Woman-like, she accredited the masculine memory with a feminine sensitiveness and constancy it did not possess ; and the thought that Steele, as his knowledge of Isolde grew, was continually contrasting her with the sister with whom, at the same age, he had been equally familiar, was gall and wormwood to her proud and jealous spirit. In fact, the young man was doing nothing of the sort. Had Althea been as wise on this subject as she was on others, however, she would not have been a woman. In truth, she was most unwise. She revived the memories she would have given half her life to

obliterate, and virtually forced him to draw the unfavorable contrast she was dreading.

The result was almost as painful to him as to her. At times, in Isolde's presence, with a repentant mood upon him, he felt that he hated Althea ; notwithstanding which they were speciously, at all times, the best of friends. In fact, Isolde, in her innocent soul, had marvelled more than once at the mysterious intimacy which did not openly declare itself, but which occasional unwatchful moments suggested or betrayed. Her limited experience had held no precedent of such social illustration of the Platonic theory.

"He called you 'Thea,'" she said, one day to the sister, gazing at her with puzzled, questioning eyes.

It had been an intentional slip of the tongue upon his part, which Althea had hoped unnoticed—a slip into which her own folly had wilfully betrayed him. If she chose to be reckless, he had no wish to restrain her. But Althea did not choose, thereafter. Even Dr. Keene, watching the Ledge with suspicious, vigilant eyes, could not but admit that, for once, Althea's conduct judged as Althea's was above reproach. Cognizant of the old doctor's watchfulness, she did not resent it. On the contrary, she encouraged his constant presence at the Ledge with a graciousness which irritated him, because he failed to divine its motive. In truth, Althea knew that should the news of Steele Harriman's renewed intimacy at the Ledge reach George's ears, the co-existent presence of his friend and confidant, Dr. Keene, would leave him little, if anything, to say.

The old doctor's interest in the girl deepened as he watched. He read the poems of her pen and the poem of her life, simultaneously, and found that the keynotes clashed. One day he told her as much.

“ You are trying to serve two masters, Art and Nature,” he said, “ and their claims conflict. Unless one yields, you will be like a bird of which both earth and heaven hold a wing, to rend its heart between them. Art is a hard mistress, but a harder master. Women like you are born for sweeter service. Let your life be an altar to your womanhood, your genius its holocaust. You will miss some joy, yes; but more pain.

“ *The true gods sigh for the cost and the pain—
For the reed that grows never more again
As a reed with the reeds of the river.*”

“ The laurels of fame are for man’s brow, the rose of love, for the woman’s. Resign the laurels, and escape—“ the cost and the pain ! ” ”

CHAPTER VIII.

TO YOUTH'S SWEET PAGE.

*“The true gods sigh for the cost and the pain—
For the reed that grows never more again
As a reed with the reeds of the river.”*

The words haunted Isolde. They sobbed between her and the young bird's music, cast a shadow between her and the sunlit skies. They were like a minor refrain persistently threading, with wailing undertone, the whole glad melody of June. A phrase that she had read recurred to her—a wonderful phrase, expressing in its few brief words all the pathos of humanity.

“*The pain of the world;*”
it ran
“*The pain of the world.*”

She repeated the sad words over and over, shuddering with a mystic premonitory dread. What did they mean, what could they mean, in this beautiful, bright, youth-sweet, life-thrilled, exultant summer weather?

“I want to be happy;” she cried to the skies. “O, I want to be happy.”

“*The cost and the pain!*”
sighed the grasses.
“*The pain of the world!*”
sobbed the pines.

But Nature passes through no changeful phase that does not exercise a correspondent influence upon her human children. With her our hearts warm, quicken from bud to blossom ; with her turn reminiscent, dead faiths, dead loves, dead dreams, our autumn leaves ; with her we know a winter drear, chill, wailing, beneath whose snows but slumber the song and sunshine, the bud and blossom, the renewed youth and revivified life of spring. Hence not for long did Isolde hear the sighing grasses, the sobbing pines. She was young, and it was June, and the birds were singing their glad young songs to heaven, and her soul sung with them, the gayest, sweetest singer of them all. Not the pain of the world, but the perfect, unalloyed, bewildering joy of it, was soon again her soul's glad cry. Was her joy from without or within ? The girl did not know, but Althea did. She saw all with her calm eyes, concealed all with her calm smile. So the eternal Sphinx, mute, inscrutable, smiles with her lips of stone.

As the summer advanced, and the late June days lengthened hour by hour, as if resolved to make the most of the brief life left them, the work, the play, the very dreams of Newfield seemed to converge toward a common centre,— a tract of land whose grassy acres, sweeping from the town-suburbs to the dark pinewoods that separated the prairie-country from the mountains, were known as the Fair-grounds. Here was held the annual cattle and agricultural show of the country, when stock of royal lineage neighed and lowed and baa'd and squeaked according to its kind, lustily as any of its plebeian kindred ; when mammoth fruits and vegetables contested for badge and medal like knights for their ladies' colors ; and bins of glowing cobs reflected from recent huskings the blushes of maiden-victims of the red corn ear. Here, also, was the scene of

Newfield's great midsummer festivity, familiarly called "the picnic"—held in annual patriotic honor of the American eagle on each successive Fourth. For weeks beforehand the town was in a hospitable ferment of preparation. Passing the open-doored cottages, one was conscious of a succession of savory odors suggestive of brimming ovens, and well-stocked larders, and pantries overflowing with pasty sweets; while above, at sunny chamber-windows, buzzed swift machines cheerily as if they knew that the golden threads of fond young hopes and tender dreams were woven into every seam of the pretty summer gowns taking luring shape under the necromancy of clever feminine hands. Even the Ledge caught the prevailing fever, and Althea, invading the realm of the rosy-cheeked kitchen-maid, whose culinary good-will was equalled only by its resultant evil deeds, retired behind a barricade of dough and batter, and opened vigorous fire with egg-beaters, cream-whippers, and all their domestic kind. Isolde, since she had been entrusted with some raisins to stone, to be discovered some hours later, complacently admiring a huge bowl of carefully-preserved seedy pulps, while the raisins proper, which the cake awaited, lay beside her in an outcast heap, had been excused from active domestic service, and in lieu thereof, commissioned to guard Gaylord, whose spirits rose with his appetite, as the picnic preparations progressed.

"I 'ove pitnits," he confided to Isolde, his hands full of stolen raisins. "I 'ove pitnits, an' parties, an' yaisins, an'—an' 'ou!"

"That thar child 'll bust ef he don't quit stuffin'," protested the culinary oracle engaged for the occasion. "I know'd a little boy onct, ez snack'd raisins out o' his maw's pantry, an' chok'd on 'em, an' died plum'-off!"

"Did he do to heav'in ?" queried Gaylord with a face which would have made a Sunday-school principal dream of an angel unaware. The culinary oracle, however, was severely practical.

"He didn't git ter go ter th' picnic !" she responded, significantly.

Whereat poor little Gaylord ruefully relinquished the raisins, and fled their seductive sight.

The scene presented by the picnic on the eventful day was a varied one. Humble vehicles of every conceivable age, size, style and condition, hitched to the roadside trees and fences, to improvised posts, and as a last resort, to one another, surrounded the grounds ; while glossy chaises, handsome family carry-alls, jaunty phaetons and dashing buckboards whirled about the inner track. To the right were the toy, firework, and refreshment booths ; dilapidated structures, whose veteran legs were appropriately draped in patriotic bunting. Beyond rose the grove, the vestibule of deeper woods, beneath whose swing and hammock-hung trees were set lavishly spread guest-tables, waited upon by a volunteer committee of rustic youths and maidens. On the eastern edge of the grove was a large platform, fronted by wooden settees dejected in appearance as if they realized upon what evil days they had fallen, this site of recent Methodist camp-meetings being now prostituted to the uses of worldly revellers ; even the planks upon which the ministerial soles had rested now being profaned by light feet tripping to round-dance measures, as interpreted by the Newfield brass band. From a stand, situated in the centre of the grounds and circled by the racetrack, the more conservative element of Newfield society overlooked the scene, refreshing the inner man and woman, meantime, with sips

and tastes of such choice cups and dishes as had been reserved for the social elect. Althea, who headed the list of conservatives, had declined all invitations for Isolde; and permitted her only to overlook, not to share, the festivities. Little Gaylord, however, protested so pathetically against this elegant but unsatisfactory method of picnicking, that, as the afternoon wandered, Isolde won Althea's permission to make with him a democratic tour of the grounds. She sauntered from booth to booth, from swing to merry-go-round—each and all of which, with a lavishness born of the possession of a bright new silver dollar, Gaylord insisted upon patronizing—unconscious that after a short chat with Steele Harriman, whose handsome bays had just turned into the gates, Althea had caught up her reins and traitorously driven homeward. Sinking into a seat in view of the dancers, she watched them for a moment with pleased attention, and then drifted into a day-dream, from which Dr. Keene's voice aroused her. Her expression was at once wistful and tender, as the expression of a young face is apt to be upon which the light of pre-natal heaven has chanced to linger. The doctor, taking her by surprise, observed the light, and partially understood it.

“ You idealize everything,” he complained. “ That braying brass is singing to you with the voice of Gabriel's trumpet. You love music. Your face convicts you.”

“ Yes,” she admitted, “ I love it.”

“ As the dog loves the hand that strikes it. O woman! woman !”

“ You mean that it hurts me? How did you know?”

“ Never mind the how. Tell me why it hurts you?”

“ I suppose because it is always so sad. Its majors feign to overlaugh them, but its minors are always sigh-

ing, sighing underneath. Listen to that waltz-tune. Do you not hear the plaintiveness of it? It is like the laugh of a brave soul, beneath which the heartbreak sobs unstilled."

"Yes," he said, "I hear it. Old ears do hear such undertones, but young ears should not recognize them. 'The cost and the pain,'" as I warned you; "'the cost and the pain.'"

"Now, Doctor—at a picnic!"

"Hang, draw and quarter picnics! Must one talk only fire-crackers and peanuts at them?"

"Fi'-cwakers an' peanuts is nice," defended Gaylord, loyally.

"So are mustard-plasters and castor-oil, my young man," retorted the doctor, "as you will know by experience before this time to-morrow."

"The violin is your favorite instrument, of course?" he resumed, turning back to Isolde. "Pan made his pipe of a reed. The violin is made of a soul."

"To me," she replied, "the various voices of music are like the moods of our best-beloved. Loving the keynote, we love its chords, as kin. The harp is the poet of music, the organ its priest; the brasses are its soldiers; the reeds its courtiers, the violin is its lover."

"And music itself?"

"Music itself is the articulate sigh of the universal soul, homesick for songful heaven."

With a disapproving shake of his gray head, the doctor passed on.

The round dances ended. The "Lady Washington" succeeded them, followed by the Virginia Reel. As the latter reached its final figure, Isolde collected the festive souvenirs—consisting of fire-crackers, peanuts, prize

candy, a popcorn ball, chewing-gum, a mouth-balloon, and a dismembered but still energetic jumping-jack—with which Gaylord, not without a fine regard for his own little tastes, had generously presented her ; and was about to seek Althea, when a confusion throughout the grounds, as if of sudden panic, arrested her. Vehicles whirled madly toward the gates ; and such townsfolk as were on foot excitedly sought shelter. There were cries of “A storm !” “Look out for the wind !” followed by a general furling of tents and lowering of awnings. Then she realized that the little cloud which had risen on the western horizon, at first no larger than the proverbial hand, had grown and darkened till now it hung the heavens like a pall. There was a distant rumble of thunder, a sudden play of lightning, a far-off voice of menace from the rising wind. As she caught Gaylord in her arms, a man’s familiar voice, sharp with anxiety, called her from afar. She staggered blindly toward it through the sudden darkness that enveloped her ; then, confused and terrified, she stood still. The darkness suffocated her. A sudden, awful hush was on the world. It was broken by a peal of thunder which jarred the deafened earth, and reverberated over the mountains ; the maddened shriek of cyclonic wind rang through the pine trees ; then a mighty crash resounded, as an awful, unearthly, blinding glare folded earth and sky in one giant flame.

The wind swept on, and the lightning followed it. A shower of sudden rain, and the western storm was over ; one royal smitten pine alone marking its path of woe.

Isolde, hushing Gaylord, who was sobbing with fright in her arms, waited as the Harriman bays sped toward her from the direction whence Steele’s voice had sounded

as the storm broke. The Holbrook carriage, driven by Jack, was drawn up by her side at the same moment, with an abruptness which jounced portly Mrs. Holbrook simultaneously out of seat and temper.

“Law me!” she ejaculated, as she recovered her balance, “my best bonnet’s smashed flatter’n a griddle-cake. You’re no more of a driver, Jack Holbrook, than a — a — a pesterin’ hornet!”

“O mother! mother! give me a better reputation,” laughed Jack, as he leaped to the ground, “or Miss Sterling will not trust herself to me.”

“Get in, my dear, an’ welcome,” Mrs. Holbrook invited, in a voice in which hospitality struggled with indignation increased by a closer scrutiny of her demoralized “best bunnit.” “If he breaks our necks before he’s done with us, it may be a lesson to him; though,” she added, with scathing sarcasm, “taint likely as necks is of any more account to him than—than bunnits!”

Steele Harriman, driving up at this juncture, arrested Isolde’s ascent into the Holbrook carry-all.

“Mrs. Rounds authorized me to drive you home,” he explained.

He took abrupt leave of the Holbrook party, and in silence assisted Isolde and Gaylord into the carriage. As he took his seat beside her, Isolde noticed that his face and lips were pale and nervous. His voice, when he spoke, was unsteady.

“The tree!” he said. “I saw it fall—not ten yards from you. If you had been under it—or even a few yards nearer! My God!”

Her lips trembled. Her eyes as she turned them on him, were suffused with grateful tears.

“I was standing under it when your voice called me to-

ward you ! " she said. " Under God, we owe our lives to you."

" Thank your God, for us both ! " he said, lifting his hat. " I would thank Him with you—if I knew how ! "

" If ? " she repeated.

He ignored the wistful query, and lashed the bays into a gallop. Isolde was only too glad that their pace should absorb his attention. Intuitively she realized that he was not quite master of himself. She thought that the scene had unnerved him. In truth, it was not the scene, but its unexpected effect upon him, which was the secret of his emotion. As he said, the tree had fallen not ten yards from her. In the agony of the moment when he had thought her under it, he had learned that the girl was dear to him. The revelation was apposite, coming as it did, upon a word from Althea which had been a challenge, albeit a veiled one, to his manly honor. Had the girl known of it ? he asked himself, suspiciously. A glance at her unconscious face answered him. Of a sudden his mood changed. Her unconsciousness no longer pleased, it tortured him. By what right was she unconscious, sitting there within reach of his strong hand, his passionate eyes upon her ? Did her soul not only soar, but abide above, beyond him—or could he reach her, claim her, master her, if he chose ?

Again and again he asked himself the question, driving alone from the Ledge-gate. Reaching his stables, he threw the reins to the groom, and ordered that Ladybird be saddled without delay. He paced up and down impatiently, restlessly, as he waited. The fever in his blood, the turmoil in his heart, the struggle of his soul—whence came they ? From a girl's fair face, a girl's soft voice, a girl's white heart !

He leaped to the saddle, as Ladybird was led out and without a word or look to the Jehu at her bridle, galloped out of sight. Jehu gazed after him with sullen eyes.

“Th’ team’s all o’ a lather, an’ that thar mare’s got ter race wi’ th’ devil, an’ beat!” he confided to the maid, whom the sound of hoofs in the stable-yard had brought to the door. “I hate a man as takes his tantrums out in hoss-killin.’ It’s a darned mean trick.”

“A man’s bound ter take his tantrums out o’ suthin weaker—its his natur’!” responded the maid, severely. “When ’taint a hoss he’s a-takin’ ‘em outer, it’s a woman!”

“He’d be a smart man as ’ud take his tantrum out o’ yo’!” meditated Jehu, admiringly.

“Jest yo’ try it,” invited the maid, briskly.

The summer twilight was darkening to night. Little by little, as the miles behind her multiplied, Ladybird’s gallant pace slackened. Finally, the feverish restlessness of his mood abating, Steele reduced it to a walk. After a time, he threw the rein on her neck, quieting her with a word and caress; and striking a match on the saddle, proceeded to light and smoke a cigar. Far behind him the town-lights twinkled, but in the country about him all was dark and still. Now and again a cow’s low floated to him, or the gentle whinny of a pastured horse; peaceful sounds which intensified, rather than lessened, the restful silence of the night.

He looked up to the starlit sky. Who shall tell the thoughts of a man alone with his soul in the night’s awed hush and darkness? What do the angels read, watching him through the peep-holes that we call stars? Backward thoughts of youth and childhood, forward thoughts of maturity and age, upward thoughts of God and heaven,

downward thoughts of flesh and hell ; thoughts that speed back to birth, and on to death ; peaceful thoughts of faith, and trust, and hope, and love ; warring thoughts of doubt and fear, of hatred and despair ; thoughts that wing his soul, and thoughts that clog it ; thoughts of joy and thoughts of sorrow ; bitter thoughts and sweet : now commingled and now separate—thoughts, thoughts, thoughts !

It was an hour, a scene, in which, inevitably, a man must have faced himself, and through himself his God ! The divine spark ever smoldering within Steele Harriman's soul leaped up and quickened into flame. In the turmoil of day he could fight the spark and conquer it, but in this holy hour of truce, when the fray of the world had ceased, and the clash of its arms was silent, the flame would not be trampled. Down from the sky the stars were shining softly ; up toward the sky his soul-flame leaped, fanned by the winds, fed by the moon's white fire. Life, which his materialistic creed regarded as the simple human evolvent of living prolific Nature, of a sudden took on immortal spiritual meanings. In vivid panorama its phases from birth to death passed before his eyes, illumed by the revealing stars of heaven.

Babyhood. As a birdling from its dream, a soul wakes from night to day. The name of the day is Life. Its eyes are dazzled by the sudden light. Its wings are gone, and its cloud-nest is—where ? In place of the wings, flesh ; of the cloud-nest, a cradle. Its little hands quiver toward the ladder of the sunshine ; its wistful eyes wander toward the sky. Its voice lifts in a faint sad cry—a homesick cry for heaven. Of a sudden the cry is stilled. The little lips are hushed against something soft and warm ; the little hands waver up, and thrill with the first

rapturous contact of human flesh with flesh. The little mouth sucks in its first sweet draught, and life is begun.

Childhood. The cradle is set away and the mother-bosom covered. The child has outgrown both. He wakes from his sleep, and leaps on lusty limbs from his small white cot, running out knee-deep into the morning grasses. All about him pink, sweet flowers are blooming ; past all he runs unheeding, his eyes fixed on one far, fair rose. He presses toward it, tottering on tiptoe as he strains up, up, little arms lifted, little hands open, little fingers curved for grasping the rose beyond his reach. A great stone lies near by. He strains at it till his arms are aching, and his tiny body tired, rolling it over and over toward that tempting rose. He mounts it with a laugh of triumph ; at last the rose is within his reach ! With both hands he clutches it greedily. Then a cry, a sob, a shower of childish tears, through which he looks from his hands to the rose, from the rose back to the little palms its cruel thorn has wounded. He sobs, and sobs, and will not be comforted ; and the grown folk think the thorn still hurts him. They do not think of the pain of life's first lesson, sunk deeply, cruelly, as the thorn in his palm, into the trusting childish heart !

Boyhood. No more tears, no more idle wanderings in morning gardens. Life is real ; life is earnest. Men and books and something within him more eloquent than either, tell him this. He runs, and rides, and swims, and wrestles. Only thus can he become a man. He cons Latin and Greek conjugations, and pores musty lore-books. Only thus can he become a scholar. And to be a man and scholar, this is all ! Is it all ? There comes an hour when the day is ended, and his companions have left him, and his tasks are done ; an hour all his own.

He steals away from the hearthstone out into the darkness, his eyes fastened on the starlit sky. Is it all, to be a man and a scholar—all the meaning, the end and issue of birth, and life, and death?—Death! He feels that the night is chill, and the darkness lonely. His breath comes a little faster; he crouches closer to the ground. Yes, he knows of death. A boy of his class died last week, and they shut him in a box, and buried him far, far down in the cold dark earth. He had not been a man; not even a scholar. His birth, his life, his death, then—were they nothing, nothing? The stars hold his eyes—or is it the face of the dead boy looking from them? Of a sudden he remembers all that his mother and the good old parson have told him of God, and heaven, and angels. His lifted face is illumined. For an instant he catches a glimpse of life as God means it—the mortal way to the immortal goal; the human means to the divine end! He clasps his hands on his heart. Tears are running down his face. “O God!” he cries under his breath. O God!

But the next morning he has forgotten. Birth and life and death are mysteries for women and preachers to ponder. For a boy—to be a man and scholar, this is all!

Youth. The Latin and Greek are laid away, the books conned to their end. Now a new book lies before him—the wonderful book called the World. He opens it with eager hand and hopeful heart, and eyes bright with ambition. For a few chapters he reads on lightly; then he pauses, flushing like a boy. The new page is fair to sight, and sweet of scent, and O, warm and soft, and thrilling—sweet of touch! He reads on with kindled eyes and clasped hands, and panting breath. His body thrills and quivers; his heart burns his breast like a white-hot flame.

He falls on his knees ; his burning face is hidden in his hands. The boy's problem is solved. He knows now, all life's secret. He reads it on Youth's first sweet page of—Love !

Manhood. Life, like history, repeats itself. The story of youth's love is the story of the child and the rose. He has read the sweet tale to its end ; plucked the rose and felt the thorn-pricks. The difference is that he sheds no tears. His eyes are dry, and overbright. They wear a hard glitter. He sighs, and reads on listlessly. Soon two pages hold his eyes. The first is radiant-white ; it bears in golden letters, a single name—God. The other is unlettered and untinted, a dim, dull opaque blank. Between them his eyes hesitate. God ! God ! the golden Name allures him. He recalls a word of the good old parson's, gone, long since, to his reward : “*There is no peace where God is not !*” A sob breaks from his breast—it is so true, so true. In all these restless, feverish, wasted, Godless years, no peace, no peace ! “O God !” he cries in an ecstasy of reawakened faith—“O God !” But the cry is hushed on his lips. “There is no God,” refutes the world. “To be a man and scholar, this is all !” He averts his eyes from the pure white page with the golden Name upon it. “There is no God !” he echoes, and fixes his eyes on the blank.

Age. The story of life is ending. Only a few brief, unread pages, and then—. He reads on, slowly, painfully. His eyes are dim ; his hands tremble ; his palsied finger traces word and line, lest his failing sight wander. The pages are reminiscent. Babyhood, childhood, boyhood, youth, manhood, all the secrets of their sealed pages are retold in fitful fragments. Sometimes he sighs, sometimes a tear blurs his sight. He brushes it away, and

reads on. He would pause so gladly, but ah ! he cannot, he cannot ; a resistless force impels him on and on. He trembles as he nears the end ; his face is gray and drawn ; he clasps with impotent hands the passing pages. Let him turn back ; let him read again life's story. He has read it so hastily, so carelessly ; missing its best sweet-ness, its highest beauty, its noblest meaning. Just for one little span of years, one little space of life, let him turn back, O, let him turn back ! Nay ! the pages pass on swiftly. He clenches his hands upon their margin with a defiant cry. He will not read further, he will not ! Poor vain resister. Before his shuddering eyes already the last leaf opens. Upon it is pictured a new-dug, open grave. His sight is blurred. He shuts the book, and totters wildly to his feet. His limbs fail him ; he staggers and falls. A terrible agony convulses him. There are chill white drops of anguish on his brow. His sightless eyes grow fixed and glassy ; his pale lips writhe and shrink apart. The book falls from his nerveless hands ; with a wild, despairing cry he sinks prostrate upon it. His death-cry rings through the world, but the world hears not, nor heeds it. Only the children shudder, and creep closer to each other in their small white beds. Some of them weep, because it is dark, and because they are frightened, and because—because—they know not why. In after years they will know, but they will deny it. Like the rest of the world, they will say, "There is no God !" But in the midnight, beside a death-bed, in some chill haunted hour of hush and darkness, the death-cry will come back to them—the cry old as humanity, universal as mortality ; on the lips of the faithful soul a cry of hope and rapture, on the lips of the unfaithful, a cry of mad despair ! The brief cry, the long cry, uttered

in a breath, reverberating through all eternity ; the cry of the finite to the Infinite, of the creature to his Creator, of the impotent to the Power, “ O God ! O God ! O God !”

He broke from his reverie with a shuddering sigh. Reaching the home-gate, his face was wan and rigid. Nevertheless there was an exaltation, a dawning radiance upon it, flickering purely, whitely, as the reflection of a celestial flame. Whence did it come ? What did his eyes read by it ?

Ah ! who shall tell the secrets of “ Youth’s sweet page ? ”

CHAPTER IX.

IN GOD'S GOOD TIME.

As the Newfield Bank entered upon the second quarter of its existence, the young banker realized that he had attained celebrity. During his flying trips to Denver and Omaha, he was pointed out as a man of note. In Chicago and San Francisco his name began to be known in connection with certain bonanza railroad schemes then agitating the financial heart of the West. Eastern brokers, in daily communication with him by mail and wire, prophesied that he would make a stir in the speculative market. He accepted the general tribute with the natural indifference of the born leader of men ; an indifference the more sincere because the tribute left him unsatisfied. A repressed yet defiantly articulate cry was ever ringing from some mysterious void within him, for something deeper than life yet held him—something higher, fuller, more. If he realized that the cry was that of his starved and stunted soul, he scorned to acknowledge it, even to himself. But there was no indifference, feigned or real, about old John Harriman, upon whom the laurels reflected. He absolutely radiated delighted pride and gratification as he sat, day after day, in the alcove of one of the bank's great windows, beaming approval on the depositors as they passed in and out. Many of them lingered daily for a chat with the genial old man, whose simple faith in "my son Steele" and the Newfield Bank was at once reassuring

and contagious. Runs were made on the less popular banks of neighboring towns, and accounts transferred to Steele Harriman. Private deposits poured in upon him. He held money in trust for more unprotected women than are supposed to exist in that region of gallant westerners. Moreover, he was fortunate in his private financial ventures—"had the devil's own luck," as he termed it, in somewhat ambiguous self-congratulation. Cautious men watched his investments; ambitious men duplicated them. The town itself, under the manipulation of a master-hand, suddenly leaped into prominence. A land-boom cleverly started in the vicinity, died a natural death, indeed, but its progressive spirit outlived it. An influx of enterprising eastern blood infused Newfield veins with new life and vigor; homes and shops and professional offices rose with the phenomenal suddenness of the mushroom growth of a night. And justly or unjustly, the entire credit of the boom was attributed to the Newfield Bank.

The bank closed at three. Regularly, a few hours later, Steele mounted Ladybird, and turned into the road that led to the Ledge. The gossip which had once coupled his name with Freshet Sal's had subsided. If, of late, he ever turned into the Freshet road, only Ladybird knew it. Friendly eyes followed him, and friendly hearts felt drawn closer to him, because of the embryo love-story which his frequent visits to the Rounds' house seemed to indicate. Only Isolde was blind to the indications; but their spell, though unrecognized, was upon her maiden-heart. The vestal veil which had rendered it hitherto as inaccessible as inviolable was stirred. Its white film fluttered in the breath of dawning revelation, like a lily in the morning wind that presages the sun. She did not realize that

life had taken on a new aspect for her ; she knew only that it no longer held the old.

She grew a little pale, a little listless. The human social intercourse which had been so sweet to her lost its charm. Her old solitary tastes revived. She took long lonely rides toward the mountains, solitary strolls under the mountain-pines. She kept shy, sweet, night-long vigils, tossing on her white bed in waking dreams. She prayed long prayers, and knelt when they were ended, worldless, motionless, her face hidden in her hands ; conscious of no thoughts, yet with a maelstrom of thought seething in fears, hopes, visions, within her. She turned to Althea with a new tenderness—the woman-want had wakened with the woman-heart. She yearned for her mother. To lay her head on the mother-breast, to feel the fold of mother-arms, must be to solve the riddle of her heart's new, mystic pain. She crushed back the longing as disloyal to Althea, and sought refuge in her books. For hours she sat with the open pages before her, only to realize, later, that she had not read a word. Of what had she been thinking ? She could not answer. Evasive, elusive, intangible, yet O, how vivid, those virginal day-dreams ! Then she turned to her writing. At first her pen went swiftly, striving to keep pace with her flame-like thought. In the fever of creation her lines sang spontaneously ; but when in calmer hours she read them over, she marvelled at them. Whence had come their vivid life and glow, their new-born strength and passion ? She wrote on and on, as the fire of inspiration waxed ; then, with her pen still at white heat, she dropped it. Words ! words ! words ! What were they but soulless shadows, mocking the living heart they would fain reveal ?

Of a sudden, all life took on a personal human meaning

for her. Every pain and every joy of the world was her individual personal pain. Every brave deed done ennobled her as the doer ; every ignoble wrong stabbed her to her bare white soul. The mother-heart stirred within her. The voices of little children echoed through her, hauntingly as the burden of a sweet sad song. She took them in her arms and pressed her lips to their faces, whispering mother-prayers above their little heads. One day she broke into bitter sobbing over Gaylord's golden curls.

“To go back—only to go back and be a child again !” she murmured.

Ah ! the childhood had fled forever. She, too, was in the joy, the pain, the dream, the travail, born of “Youth’s sweet page.”

One afternoon in early autumn Steele rode up to the Ledge gate, and hallooed to the maid an imperious summons for Mrs. Rounds. As she came out he dismounted, surlily.

“Why have I not been told what has been going on up here ?” he demanded, abruptly.

“I do not understand,” evaded Althea, but she looked conscious as she said it. She did understand quite well.

A week earlier, Jack Holbrook, coming upon Isolde as she walked on the lawn at twilight, had flushed and faltered, and finally flung out his hands boyishly, and clasped hers, toying with the golden-rod at her belt.

“Miss Sterling—Isolde—” he stammered, “you—you must know—how it is—with me. If there is no one in the East—”

She interrupted him gently but firmly.

“There is no one anywhere, Jack, as yet !” she said.

"Be my dear friend always. Do not pain me by asking to be more."

And manfully Jack had taken his answer, resuming with a brave, if saddened, heart his old footing at the Ledge.

The young people had supposed the secret all their own, but they had forgotten little Gaylord, playing near them at the time. Five minutes later he had dashed into the house, breathless and incoherent with indignation.

"Jack Holbwook's a nassy sing," he sobbed to his mother. "He took't 'Soldy's han's out dere by de foun'-t'in an' jes' 'queezed 'em awful, an' he hurted her, he did, for s'e's up in her woom, a-kyin'!"

Althea was neither surprised nor ill-pleased at the recital. Her family vanity was gratified, and she knew that the little incident could be turned to Isolde's advantage. That she had not scrupled thus to turn it, was proved by Steele Harriman's lowering face.

"The boys are all laughing at him," he said, gloomily. "They say that any man would be a fool to hope to keep her here."

"So any man would be," assented Althea — "save one."

"You know this?" he cried, breathlessly.

She hesitated.

"Pshaw!" he said. "You are not sure of me—not sure of me! I thought you knew me better."

"It is because I know you so well," she retorted, "that I cannot be sure of you."

He flushed, and prodded the bank with his spur. "You may be sure," he said, at last. "I am in earnest."

For answer she held him out a folded sheet of paper.

"It is—?" he questioned, eagerly.

"Rather a pretty rhyme."

With an impatient exclamation he unfolded it, reading with kindling eyes the little impromptu verse which in the fulness of her girlish heart Isolde had dashed off, some days earlier, and forgotten thereafter. She had entitled it—

IN GOD'S GOOD TIME.

O morning sun, as a glad young lover
 To far tryst speeding with kindled soul,
 Across the mist and the clouds hung over,
 You seek forever your western goal !
 Fair skies smile vainly to tempt and stay you—
 Beyond them, splendor of height sublime.
 Peace ! you shall gain it, full sure attain it,

In God's good time.

O fledgling-bird with wee heart a flutter,
 As wings wave open like gates ajar,
 What yearnings wild in your songs you utter
 For boughs that beckon from fields afar !
 The safe home-nest and the meads that know you
 Are naught to freedom and foreign clime.
 Peace ! wings shall strengthen, and brief flights lengthen,

In God's good time.

O budding rose, in your sweet spring garden,
 With young heart weary of calyx-gloom,
 Against the wound of your brown thorn-warden
 Your strain to sunshine and summer bloom :
 The Past, the Present, are buds unbearing—
 The Future, flower of golden prime.
 Peace ! you shall prove it, to rue or love it,

In God's good time.

And thou, my heart, in youth's incompleteness
 To sun and songster and rose akin,
Thou, too, dost yearn for the mystic sweetness
 Like unquaff'd nectar Life's cup within !
O draught divinest, whose eterne pæan
 All earth and heaven in chorus chime
(Shall I dare name thee ?)—*Love!* call me, claim me,
 In God's good time.

He refolded the sheet and slipped it into his breast-pocket.

“ Well ? ” he asked.

“ She does not love you yet, that is, not consciously ; but the possibility of love is revealing itself. She is still in her girlhood's dream, but she is in your power. You may waken her when you will.”

His eyes flashed. His hands, toying restlessly with his whip, were suddenly clenched.

“ Don't ! ” he cried, in impulsive incoherent appeal, which the woman both understood and disregarded—“ don't—for her sake ! I am not worthy—yet. There is something to—to retrieve, to leave behind.”

“ Yes,” interrupted Althea, with calm acquiescence ; “ the Freshet cabin.”

At her words he started, and a sudden, bitter contempt for her burned in his eyes. Believing the worst of him, she was yet not only willing, but eager, to force her pure young sister into his unworthy arms ! But the contempt of his thought paled before the passion of it. The hot blood surged to his face.

“ I—I thought there must be longer waiting ! ” he cried, almost humbly. “ She is snow, and I am fire. I feared to frighten her, to repel her, if I spoke too soon.”

"You may waken her when you will," repeated Althea. The words did their evil work. His control was lost, his hesitation over.

"The waiting has been torture," he cried. "Worthy or not, by heaven, I'll claim her now!"

He leaped to the saddle, touching the mare with his spur. She reared and plunged spiritedly. When he had controlled her, his face and voice were calm.

"There will be a dance to-night in Jenkins' barn," he said. "Tell Miss Sterling that the scene will afford her unique literary material. With her permission, I will call for her at about eight."

Althea's eyes followed him until he had ridden out of sight. Then she turned back to the house. In her bedroom Isolde was rocking, with Gaylord in her arms. There was a sweetness upon the girl's face not without its sadness, had loving eyes read it aright. It told of unconscious repression, of a secret only half cognizant of itself, of a dream trembling on the verge of waking, at once the dread and the desire of the uncomprehending virgin soul.

"Who was your caller?" she asked, as Althea rejoined her.

"Harriman, junior, to offer you his escort to the Jenkins' barn-dance to-night. I accepted for you."

A sudden tide of color surged over the girl's face, dyeing it a shamed crimson, and forcing hot tears to her eyes. She freed herself from Gaylord's clinging arms, and crossed to her sister's side.

"Althea," she said, "I—I cannot go with him! Perhaps you have noticed that I—that I have not been——"

"That you have not been quite the same to him since poor Jack opened your innocent eyes to the aspirations

of his sex? Oh, yes, my dear, I have noticed it; and so, undoubtedly, has he. Is it wise to have forced him to notice it, Isolde? Is it not just possible that you are—fighting a shadow?

She drew herself up haughtily, with burning face.

“Althea,” she cried.

“Oh, my dear, plain words break no bones—and I assert nothing! I merely suggest.”

“Your suggestion is unnecessary.”

“I am delighted to hear it. I need no longer fear for you, then, that most ridiculous of feminine blunders—a premature retreat.”

For a moment the girl stood shamed, bewildered, indignant; but of a sudden her pride deserted her. She fell on her knees, burying her face in her sister’s gown.

“Althea,” she sobbed, “I—I want to go home. I want to go to mother. I am homesick—so homesick, Althea, I cauot bear it any longer. I must go home to-morrow.”

Althea took the tear-wet face between her hands, and scanned it with pitiless eyes. She smiled as she released it.

“A retreat invites pursuit,” she said; “and no one can say that you have forced the battle, should you be overtaken and—captured. In spite of your innocence, you are a diplomate, my Isolde. Yes, you shall go home to-morrow. I will pack for you, to-night. In the meantime, put on your prettiest gown and your merriest mood. The woman who covers her retreat with a smile, converts it into an attack. Like the crab, she advances—backing.”

Later, as the Harriman buggy drew up at the Ledge gate, Althea hastened down to meet it.

“You have played the cat too long,” she whispered to

Steele. "The tortured mouse is escaping you. Her trunks are packed. She will leave Newfield to-morrow."

Then she turned to the little white figure poised like a fluttering bird on the gate-step, and pressed a kiss on the cheek already crimsoning beneath Steele Harriman's eyes.

CHAPTER X.

THE DANCE IN JENKINS' BARN.

“She does not love you yet, that is, not consciously; but the possibility of love is revealing itself. She is in your power. You may waken her when you will.”

Althea had spoken the words lightly, but they were not light words. Instantaneously, radiantly as a lightning-flash, they had revealed to Steele Harriman the hitherto unrecognized strength of the passion within him. He had dreamed it but a bud, a young, pale, tender bud, just tinged with warmth and color like a white rose at the heart. But in that moment of revelation it had burst from its bud forever, flashing forth in the majestic maturity of ripe immortal bloom.

Until now he had kept, instinctively, a strict guard on his thoughts. Resolved, as he had told Althea, to retrieve the old life before committing himself to the new, he had realized, though scarcely consciously, that in the meantime his self-control must be absolute, to be control at all. A lover's fancy is a fiery steed. Once given its head, the bit is taken between its teeth beyond the restrictive power of curb or rein. Excited thoughts, dreams, visions, surged like waves through his heated brain. She was so fair, so sweet, so young, so tender! She was so proud, so yielding! He had tasted of both her pride and her submission, and panted to drink the draught, and drain. So frail! With a rapturous, triumphant thrill he realized

his strength against her weakness, fancied her fluttering like a bird in his heart's close toils—fluttering wildly, vainly, and yielding the strife at last. She was so pure, so pure! Her spirit had soared unsullied, while his had trailed soiled pinions in the dust. Involuntarily he glanced in the direction of the Freshet cabin. The few follies and more faults, the many sins of his life, were all as nothing beside this irretrievable one. Irretrievable? No, it could not, should not, be that. He must, please God, he would, retrieve it for love's pure sake. The means of retrieval he would consider later; for the present, let his oath suffice. This holy hour had room for only her, her!

He turned to the girl at his side, an apology for his abstraction on his lips, but he did not speak it. She, too, was engrossed in her unspoken dream. Her eyes were fixed on the far mountains. Her upturned face was luminous, as from the light of divine vision. Beside him, she was as yet as far above him as the evening's vestal star.

"You are looking not at the mountains, but beyond them," he said. "I see but the symbol; you the meaning. What is it?"

"I was thinking," she said, "that they are God's allegory—the natural typification of the human, even as the human is the typification of the Divine. Every phase of human life is pictured in them. The plain is our childhood, sunlit with love, flowered with caresses, songful with laughter and lullaby, and tender mother-words. The foothills are our youth, sunlit, flowered, songful still; but with occasional lonely, shadowed, bleak, still stretches which we must climb alone. The mountain is maturity. Here the sun is brightest, the bloom most bountiful, the

song most rich and sweet ; here, too, is the shadow darkest, the waste most dreary, the way most steep. Higher up, at the summit, waits Age ; a realm of cloud, a twilight shore, cradle of the mists, birthplace of the mountain-shadows. A dark cavern lurks within it. We call it Death. An ice-cold blast strikes us and bears us through it, above the cloud-palled mountain-top. We do not feel the passage, we drift through it, in a dream. When we wake, the mountain is below us. Before, above us, heaven—past the summit-gates of snow ! ”

His eyes, like flames, flashed on her.

“ There is only one heaven for man,” he cried : “ the heaven of love.”

“ Yes,” she answered, “ for God is love.”

“ But I mean human love, woman’s love ! ” he cried, recklessly.

She answered him with startled, shrinking, unconsciously questioning eyes.

Words of passionate avowal rushed to his lips, but he forced them back. Not yet, not here, not thus ! In a dim and dreamful way he had pictured the environment he would choose. He was tempted to smile at the absurd lover-like thought that suggested itself, that his arms now claimed by his spirited team, must be free—free to fold, to hold, to press, to crush—he pulled himself up with a sharp breath. Jove ! what a thing a man’s love is ! Do men love in vain, and live ?

He controlled himself, but not before his face had betrayed him. Incomplete as the betrayal was, it startled her. She felt in every thrilling, quivering nerve the premonition of an undefined, yet imminent, personal danger. The tremulous, nervous eagerness with which she broke the perilous silence appealed to his manly chivalry.

Poor little, white-winged bird fluttering in shadow of the net, let her flutter with free wings while she might.

“ You have never been to a Harvest Home ? ” he asked her, smiling at her ingenuous relief at his commonplace words. “ It is an autumnal religious festival, you know, to which Newfield adds a social appendix. We are too late for the service, but we will drive around by the church and give you a peep at the interior, whose vegetable decorations are unique if not beautiful. Pumpkins take the place of roses, and grains of smilax. The service is one of thanksgiving.”

He drew up at the little white church as he spoke. The doors were open. Through them flashed the gold and red and purple of the harvest decorations. The walls were hung with the boughs of fruit and draped with grape-vines, the corners stacked with corn and grain-sheaves, the chancel heaped with green and yellow melons, red “ love-apples,” golden pumpkins—all the glowing vivid treasure of harvest’s luscious store. The words of the final hymn floated clearly over the still night :

“ O Lord ! spring and summer,
In sunshine and rain,
We grafted the orchards,
We planted the grain.
On fields lying fallow,
By night and by day
The good seed we scattered,
And Thou dost repay.
Now ripe is our harvest
For sickle and wain;
Fruits glow in our orchards,
Our fields glint with grain ;
Our meadows are golden

With hay new and sweet ;
Our corn waits the husking,
 The flail waits our wheat.
For seed-time and harvest,
 In humble award,
We bless Thee, we praise Thee,
 We thank Thee, O Lord !

“ Lo, Lord, on Thine altar
 Our first-fruits we lay—
Corn juicy with kernels,
 Oats ripe on the spray ;
Sheaves poppied and heavy
 With succulent wheat,
And fruit of the vineyard,
 Round, purple, and sweet ;
Young apples still fragrant
 And pink with the May,
Plums dusky and golden
 In mellow array ;
Herbs tasselled and tender,
 Nuts swelling with meat,
Combs flowing with honey,
 We lay at Thy feet.
For first-fruits and last-fruits,
 In humble award,
We bless Thee, we praise Thee,
 We thank Thee, O Lord !

“ O Lord, of all harvests,
 We, too, are Thy grain ;
Swift Time Thy sure sickle,
 And Death Thy dark wain !
Our souls, be they fallow
 Or sown with bad seed,
Thine anger shall perish,
 As tempest the reed.
Sin sweeps like a whirlwind—
 We breast it in vain ;

Onr corn runs to cockle,
To chaff our good grain.
Thy sowing is scattered,
And tares choke Thy seed,
Yet reap not in vengeance
Nor anger, we plead.
As love was Thy sower,
Be Mercy Thy sword,
And garner Thy harvest
In Heaven, O Lord ! ”

As the service ended, Steele touched his team with the whip, and the carriage whirled out of sight of the outpouring congregation.

“ We will take the long way round to the barn,” he said, turning into a by-road, “ and give the natives time to assemble. Jenkins’ barn and—you? What a ridiculous, incongruous association. Suppose we forego the dance and take a drive toward the mountains instead, with the harvest-moon to light us? ”

He smiled at her eager disclaimer. He had known that she would refuse, even as he asked her. Under the circumstances, her acceptance would have discomfited him. Her refusal did not.

Jenkins’ barn was not, as the uninitiated might suppose, a hay-filled outbuilding of the Jenkins’ farm ; but an empty shed rising from a tract of pasture-land, and unused in winter save as a temporary shelter for man and beast. With the advent of the warmer season, however, its festive days began. Picnic-parties spread their luncheons under its noon-day shade ; riders halted within its spacious grounds ; and many a lover’s “ buggy-ride ” was interluded by a merry dance upon its starlit floor. On the present occasion the barn was trimmed with boughs,

and hung with lanterns shining like Argus-eyes upon the dark roads ringing with hoofs and wheels.

As they entered, the nondescript instrument strained of back and screechy of strings, which the proud manipulator thereof fondly designated as a "vy'lin," struck into the jiggly measure of the "Arkansas Traveller!" Lanterns swayed from the high brown rafters, and blazed in fiery groups from the corner beams; while rows of tallow candles sputtered along the walls, a favored few set in tin sconces, but the majority consigned to humbler candelabras made of pine laths closely spiked with sharp-pointed nails. From one end of the barn, whence the odor of cider floated, shone a bin of ruddy apples, faced by a row of tables spread with cakes, cookies, and doughnuts. Dancers were already upon the floor, but the majority of the company still lingered about the doorway. The Hunter sisters, fluttering with vivacity and ribbons, descended upon Isolde as Steele found her a seat.

"We had given you up," cried Milly, shrilly, "and were just about to melt into tears on the spot. Not for you—don't take that sweet unction to your credulous soul; but because it goes without saying, as the dear French say, that unless you brought him, we should pine in vain for our best dancer, Steele Harriman, Esquire, Banker of Newfield!"

"Banker of Newfield," reiterated Cilly.

The B. O. N. bowed profoundly.

The vy'lin aforesaid, having followed the "Arkansas Traveller" to his journey's end, had been squirming and squeaking in ineffectual struggles to wrest from its inner anatomy an evasive tune. Finally, however, its persistence triumphed, and through the barn quavered the plaintive tune of an old-fashioned waltz.

“‘Being in Rome,’” suggested Steele, “shall we not dance just this one waltz?”

As Isolde assented, there was a stir at the entrance, followed by a general surprised exclamation of admiration, as the regal form of Freshet Sal appeared in the doorway.

She wore a gown of some brilliant-hued, large-figured fabric, open at the throat, and disclosing her beautiful arms to the shoulder. Large golden hoops dangled from her ears, and on her upper arms shone a pair of massive bracelets. Her hair, coiled about her head like a crown, was surmounted by a glittering comb. Her eyes were dazzling; her cheeks warmly flushed; her vivid lips parted in a triumphant smile. She paused for an instant, in evident gratification at the impression made by her beauty, and then walked proudly down the floor to Steele Harriman, whose arm already encircled Isolde.

“Whar I hail fro’,” she said, halting before him, and speaking in a loud clear voice, “theer’s a dance called ‘Gals’ Choosin’s,’ an’ th’ man as shirks dancin’ it wi’ th’ gal as axes him is shot down dead by her men-folks. This ‘yer dance is ‘Gals’ Choosin’s’ fur me, an’ I ax Steele Harriman ter foot it wi’ me.”

The vy’lin had hushed its quavering strings, the dancers paused in their half-tripped measures. There was a general surge toward the couple. Steele’s eyes rested calmly on Sal’s excited face.

“I am already engaged for this waltz,” he said. “It is the only dance I shall dance to-night.”

He turned back to Isolde.

“You are quite free,” she said, drawing back, haughtily. In his excitement he did not heed her.

Sal stood looking at him helplessly, all the animation and triumph dying out of her face. She had been so

sure of her victory, so proud in her anticipation of this public proof of her power, and he was daring to defy her. Her eyes gleamed ominously ; she began to twist her hands, and to sway backward and forward, suggesting a beautiful tigress lashing itself to rage.

“I say yo’ shall, yo’ shall !” she panted. “I bean’t agoin’ ter be set back afore all these ’yer folks. Yo’ll dance this dance wi’ me, Steele Harriman, or I’ll—I’ll——”

In the crowd that had pressed about them there was a sudden break. A man who since Sal’s entrance had lingered in the background, a tall, fair, sinewy man, clad in the red-shirted dust-begrimed undress of an engineer, was forcing his way to the front. As he passed, some of the women shrieked, and a man’s oath was audible. His hand, lifted suddenly to his belt, had drawn forth and was proceeding to cock a revolver.

As he reached Sal’s side, by only a gesture did Steele acknowledge his presence. With a backward swing of his strong arm he put Isolde behind him.

“This ’yer gal an’ me,” said the man, slowly, “is old friends an’ ’quaintunces, an’ theer bein’ none o’ her men-kin’ ’yer ter tek up this ’yer little darncin’ matter fur her, I reck’n ez th’ shootin’ falls to me. ‘Gals’ Choosin’s’ ’s b’en th’ bull’s-eye fur more’n one shot in its day, an’ I reck’n ez it ’ll be un ’yer ter-night ef ’tain’t footed lively. ’Yer’s her, an’ ’yer’s me, an’ both o’ us awaitin’ on yo’, young feller. Jest tek yer ch’ice atwixt us.”

“Jim !” cried Sal, wildly.

An unwritten law of Newfield etiquette enjoined that a fair fight should be unspoiled by any friendly interference. That the fight should be a fair one, however, was an indispensable condition. From the crowd behind a

hand was extended over Steele's shoulder. It offered a pistol. He waved it aside.

" You forget," he said, " that there are ladies present."

" Th' wimmen-folks kin git outside. I'll giv' 'em time," said Jim, grimly.

Not a petticoat rustled, but as the revolver lifted there was a chorus of feminine shrieks. Simultaneously a dozen men leaped toward the engineer to disarm him; but Sal was before them. With one quick gesture she had wrested the pistol from his hand, and flung it over the heads of the crowd, through the open door. As it fell, it struck against the trunk of a tree. There was a flash, a sharp crackling report, and a thin line of smoke floated up toward the moonlight. Over the applause that greeted her act, her voice rang angrily.

" Yo're a fool, Jim Oakes," she cried, " an' your fool-gun's anuther. Th' next time yo' go shootin' fur me—wait till yo're axed!"

Even as she spoke she had made her way through the crowd and disappeared in the darkness. After a disconcerted hesitation the disarmed man shuffled after her, followed by jeers and threats. In gaping and exclamatory curiosity the crowd watched the couple till the last grotesque line of their shadows, gigantic in the magnifying moonlight, was merged in the mingled light and darkness of the tree-shadowed road. At this juncture the vy'lin struck up a tune. The crowd broke into groups and couples, and then ensued a moment of indecision, during which all eyes were fixed upon the young banker. Without a word he turned to Isolde, and whirled her into the centre of the floor. In another instant the dancing was resumed.

It was not until the waltz was fully under way that

Steele awoke to a realization of the resistance made by Isolde as he had drawn her to him. She had yielded for the moment, rather than cause another scene, but he now comprehended that her submission was only physical. Had he lost her? In the thought he forgot the occasion, the circumstances, the vigilant spectators; forgot all save that, perhaps, for the last sweet time, he had his arms around her. He folded her passionately, almost fiercely to him. As his eyes sought her averted face he saw it pale, and felt her light form sway in his arms. With a few adroit turns he guided her through the doorway into the shadow of the nearest pine. She leaned against the trunk, shrinking from his arms in shuddering repulse. The action was a fateful one. In the hours that had elapsed between his parting with Althea and his return to the Ledge gate, he had resolved to do by this pure and trustful girl as she should be done by, and to his confession of love add a confession of his unworthiness—of his sin and his remorse. But now his heart failed him. There was a rigidity about her moral attitude that he knew instinctively would not relax. The unwelcome conviction forced itself upon him that such confession as he had meditated would part her from him forever. Should he, as his soul besought him, dare all, at the risk of losing all? or should he woo her, win her, in untruth and dishonor, guarding his shameful secret till even its revelation could not set her free? Which? which? Her repellent gesture answered him. His resolve was taken. To reveal the truth was to lose her. He would win her by a lie.

“An explanation, as well as an apology, is due you,” he said. “If I sully your ears with a shameful story, it is because I have no choice. The woman is the unwedded mother of my dead brother’s child. To shield his name,

to spare my father the bitter pain and shame knowledge of the truth would give him, I guard the secret. Feeling a personal duty to Jack's child, however, I give the woman, who, wild and savage creature as she is, is a passionately tender mother, no choice between surrendering the child—in which case I should tell my father the whole story, and openly adopt it—and keeping the secret of its parentage, while living here, where I can personally care for its welfare. Her defiance of me to-night was her revenge. The unhappy affair would be a complex problem did the shadow of death not solve it. The child will be in its grave within a year. Therefore I bend to the painful yoke in patience. You, who to-night have shared it, shall judge for me whether I shall submit still, or cast it off."

"No, no, no!" she cried. "Bear it to the end, till God's hand lifts it." Her lifted face was radiant, even reverent. "You are good," she murmured, "good, and true, and noble. And I made it harder for you. O, I beg your pardon, I do indeed!"

He turned away abruptly. Backing the carriage out of the shed, he assisted her into it. The homeward drive was taken in silence. At the Ledge, however, with the gate between them, she spoke to him over her shoulder.

"I shall go home to-morrow," she faltered. "Thank you for all your kindness. Good-by."

He bowed in silence. The Ledge door was open. Hitching his team, he followed her through it into the empty parlor, lighted only by the moonbeams flickering through the crimson upper panes.

"You will go home to-morrow!" he repeated, softly. "When shall you come back?"

She was very pale as she turned and faced him, but her erect figure looked tall and rigid. She had braced her-

self, not for defeat, but for victory. On the silence her voice fell sharply, suddenly, like an unsheathed blade.

“I will never come back,” she said.

He smiled slowly, and took a step toward her. She would have shrunk back, but his masterful eyes were on her.

“When will you come back,” he repeated, “back—to me?”

The wind wavered by, rustling the leaves of the cotton-woods. A wakened bird trilled dreamfully to its sleeping mate. A moonbeam, striking through the ruddy pane, lingered upon the girl’s uplifted face.

Was it that roseate glow, or the luminous dove-like eyes that answered him?

“Isolde!” he cried. “Isolde!”

And the bird without trembled down in its nest, and was still.

CHAPTER XL

SAL RECEIVES A CALL, AND MAKES ONE.

On the afternoon following the Jenkins dance, the Rev. Father Harney, the Catholic priest of the parish, passing the Freshet on his round of parochial calls, was inspired to knock at the door of Sal's cabin. He was a young priest, recently ordained, and naturally of a sensitive and retiring disposition; and it was not without fear lest his zeal should render him intrusive that he entered the cabin at Sal's sullen bidding. The humble exterior of the cabin had prepared him for an interior of poverty, but not for the rude comfort and barbaric decoration which the equipment of the cabin presented. Rugs of unmounted skins were scattered over the bare pine-boards, and from the farther wall protruded the antlered head of a monster stag. In one corner stood a gun; above it hung a poignard in its sheath, beside a brace of pistols. From the centre of the ceiling dangled an Indian bow and arrow of ancient barbarous design. In the background swung a Mexican hammock heaped with robes. A couple of wicker chairs were set against the wall. A gilt-framed mirror, hung on the Freshet side of the cabin, reflected the only other conventional ornament of the room—a gaudily-framed painting of Sal herself, extravagant in coloring, inartistic in pose, crude in treatment, but true, strikingly true, in likeness. Below this picture stood a small round table upon which, beside a modern lamp, a handsomely bound Bible was lying.

Sal, seated by the table with her child in her arms, vouchsafed the young priest no further welcome than a look of defiant inquiry. He hesitated, at a loss how to approach this beautiful, savage, incongruous creature, till his eyes fell upon the gilt-framed portrait.

"What a striking likeness!" he exclaimed, drawing nearer to examine it. "As a portrait it is absolutely perfect. When was it painted?"

In spite of herself she looked mollified. "Five years ago," she admitted, "afore Waif 'yer war born. I war a harnsum gal then, ef I do say it. Th' feller ez painted that theer went crazy over me. I war happy then. Folks war clever to me. I warn't dirt under theer feet, ez I be now. Some day I'll burn it, when Waif 'yer's dead. She's dyin'. She's b'en dyin' ever sin' she war born. Folks sez it's best fur her. Likely 'tis; but she's all I've gotten. Theer's none ez keers wots best fur me."

"Yes, Sal, there is One who cares. I do not know whether you are, or are not, one of my fold; but," as she shook her head in negation, "we are all children of the one good Father."

He smiled sunnily, but there was no response on Sal's sullen face. Little Waif, however, was more amicably disposed. Emerging from the folds of the shawl into which she had collapsed temporarily, she suffered herself, though not without tremors and backslidings, to be transferred to his knees. She was a sunny-haired, snowdrop-faced little creature, whose great blue eyes looked out piteously from the purple circles that surrounded them. These tell-tale shadows were the only visible signs of the cruel infirmity that was slowly but surely sapping the childish life.

The young priest folded her in gentle arms, a patheti-

cally tender look on his face. He had sacrificed all sweet human affections upon the altar of the Divine, but the father-heart still beat within him. He stooped until his cheek rested on the childish golden hair.

"God bless His own dear little child!" he whispered.

"Canny?" suggested Waif, her little hands wandering hopefully toward his pocket.

"Not candy this time, I am sorry to say," he said, regretfully; "but"—a sudden bright idea striking him—"pictures, yes!"

From an inner pocket he took his breviary, slipping from between its leaves some lace-edged cards printed in pretty colors. At Waif's cry of delight, Sal's face relaxed.

"Thank yo' kindly," she said. "'Taint many folks ez thinks o' her, an' it's her mother she's getten ter thank fur it—her mother! It's a hard world. Ef 'twarn't fur her, I'd inter th' Freshet, an' be out o' it."

There were hot tears gathering in her sombre eyes. Her proud lips trembled. Since the previous night she had been in a bitter, resentful mood, but a look in the young priest's face had softened her. It was a look which she seemed to recognize and understand; a chastened look of patient suffering and renunciation; a look of peace born of sore struggle; of rest won through long weariness and pain. A strangled sob broke from her.

"Yo're a parson," she panted, "an' kin chapter an' varse all day fur them ez does th' wrong. Be theer a word in all th' Good Book, I ax yo', be theer—fur them as is done wrong by?"

"Yes," he replied, "a word from Him to whom the sorest of all wrongs was done, even unto death. It is, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"

There was a sudden radiance in the room as the beams

of the setting sun turned from gold to crimson. Over the silence the Freshet waters chanted. A flock of birds on nestward flight twittered a vesper choral.

"Sal," said the priest, "try to say the word—with Him."

"I can't," she cried. "It's ag'in' natur'. I'd say it will-in' ef death war th' only hurt, but it's life, it's life, that's wrongin' me!"

She stepped to the window opening on the Freshet waters, and leaned far out. When she drew in her head she was calmer.

"I'm a fool ter be so free-spoke," she said, "but I know'd a good parson onct, an' suthin' about yo' 'minds me o' him. He gev me that theer Bible yonder. He writ i'side o' it."

He opened the Bible in silence, waiting for her to speak on. He was certain that she would speak on.

"It war when I war a girl," she broke out, "an' hevin' a hard life, thro' bein' young, an' poor, an' harnsun. Theer war more like me, but they all went—under. Gentlefolks war theer, yo' see—overseers an' owners an' sech."

"Poor child!" he said, pitifully.

"Mebbe I war't jest like 'em," she said; "mebbe I war prouder'r an' fiercer'r, ez they said. Leastwise, I held out longer'r. But last off, I got tired, an' dizzy; an' suthin sez ter me: 'Wot's th' use, Sal, wot's th' use?' An' jest then kem a parson ter th' camp an' saved me."

She did not notice the priest's start of surprise as he bent over the Bible, nor the sudden flush which had risen to his face as he listened to her.

"His name," she said, "war Harney. He war a good man, a good man! Ef thar's aught o' bad I've kep' fro', it's him I've getten ter thank fur it."

"I am happy to hear you say that, Sal," he replied. "He is a good man. He is my brother; my half-brother, born of the same mother. Our fathers were cousins."

She started incredulously at him for a moment, and then cowered down in her chair, covering her face with her hands.

"No! no!" she cried: "not your brother, fur yo' ter tell—not your brother, fur yo' ter fetch an' shame me—"

With a wild laugh she interrupted herself.

"It war all a lie," she said. "I'm a bad un, I be. I war a-foolin' o' yo', a-foolin' o' yo'!"

Even as she spoke she snatched Waif from his arms and darted past him out of the cabin into the Ledge road.

The sun had set, and the twilight, dim and dewy, encompassed her. A soft west wind was blowing, sweet with the scent of hay. The prairie-grass was billowing, green grass no longer, but touched with brighter hues of gold and crimson, deepening, here and there, to umber. Birds flitted from tree to tree, chirping as they flew. The misty peaks of the mountains were carved in blue relief against the darkening sky. Above them hung a faintly luminous crescent; and in comparative adjacence shone forth in lonely radiance the evening star.

At the Ledge gate the woman stopped and looked about her. Why was she here? She had not meant to come here—yet. Ah! but had she not meant it? Brooding over her bitter wrong, her torturing shame, with the jeers and taunts that had maddened her on the previous night still ringing in her ears, had she not sworn to make this very journey, gloating maliciously over the vengeance it implied? Her hand, as it touched the gate, suddenly

faltering. Something restful, peaceful, holy in the gathering dusk arrested it. Her eyes wandered to the mountains, whose mists were blending with the shadowy twilight. Down from their heights' dim realms a winged wind fluttered, wafting an angel's whisper as it rustled by:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

She turned irresolutely, and retraced a few steps toward the cabin. Should she relinquish the revenge to which she had been spurring herself through all the restless, sleepless, miserable night? The scene whose memory scorched her haughty spirit flashed before her—the lighted barn, the mocking crowd, the scornful laughs, the taunting faces! Relinquish her revenge! No, a thousand times, no! She lifted the latch and passed in resolutely.

Gaylord, playing on the lawn, ran gayly down to meet her.

“Det down an’ yun,” he invited Waif, cordially.

“Tan’t!” she sighed, shaking her golden curls. “My ‘egs is sick. Dey’s doin’ to be well, to heav’n.”

“‘Ou won’t have legs in heav’n,” corrected Gaylord. “‘Ou’ll be a little angel, an’ have wings.”

“I’ll jes’ have bof!”

“O—o—h! Dat’s a ‘towy.”

Waif tossed her curls, indignantly.

“Towy ‘ouse’f, boy!” she retorted. “Ain’t—ain’t birdies dot ‘egs?”

Gaylord was staggered, but not convinced.

“Birds isn’t angels,” he insisted, stoutly.

Waif hesitated; then a bright thought struck her.

“Dey is,” she cried. “‘Tourse dey is, ‘tause dey’s dot wings!”

Attracted by the voices Althea looked out, and discover-

ing Sal, hastened down to meet her, not on hospitable greeting intent. She had had a surprise, not an agreeable one, in the unexpected return of her husband, scarcely an hour before. In his face, as she retailed the little fiction of her mother's illness and Isolde's sudden recall, which in the watches of the night she had invented for the satisfaction of inquiring Newfield, she had read that Dr. Keene had forestalled, betrayed her; and that George was not to be thus easily deceived. Therefore she felt already in a difficult and precarious position: and that Freshet Sal should so inopportunely appear to aggravate matters, was not to be endured. Midway up the path she met and stopped her.

"To what," she asked with scathing emphasis, "do I owe the unexpected honor of this call?"

"I bean't a-goin' ter be set back by enny o' your fine-lady words," said Sal, sulkily. "I kem yer ter see. 'Soldy Sterlin', an' see her I will!"

Althea smiled triumphantly.

"'Soldy Sterling, as you most ignorantly and impudently call her," she said, "left Newfield at noon. You are too late, my woman, too late!"

Sal had already turned away, when George Rounds overtook her. He greeted her courteously as he laid a detaining hand on her shoulder.

"My girl," he asked, "will you tell me your errand?"

"Twar a fool un," she cried, "a fool un, ef—ef——"

He read her unspoken doubt.

"Believe me," he said, "it is as my wife tells you. Miss Sterling is gone, and for good."

An amused expression flitted across Althea's face. He caught it. He drew her aside, and scanned her face with troubled eyes.

"Althea," he said, "remember that if you play me false in this, we are parted forever."

Althea turned to Sal.

"Miss Sterling is gone, for good and all," she repeated, calmly.

But even as she spoke her eyes wandered toward the distant tracks along which the evening train was speeding eastward, the train from which, a fortnight thereafter, Steele Harriman waved farewell as from the Ledge tower window she watched him out of sight.

And over those same far tracks, a few weeks later, Steele Harriman and Isolde returned together—man and wife.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HONEYMOON.

Girlhood—wifehood—the two sweetest phases of a woman's life—the first yielding up its pure young life for the second, unmurmuringly, lovingly, as the young mother yields her life for her child. And the priest sings the Te Deum for the new-born, but he sobs no De Profundis over the beautiful ungraved dead. Only here and there from some pale woman's lips falls a prayer, from her eyes a tear.

They had made only a few days' tour, as Isolde, dazed by the change in her life, looked toward her new home as to a refuge wherein her bewildered soul might recover calm and peace. Accepting the fact of love, she had ignored its correlative fact of marriage with an instinct as innately maidenly as it was unconscious. When her dream of truce was wakened she had succumbed perforce, but not without a fierce, if brief, struggle; and she was still bewildered by the unexpectedness of her defeat. Dr. Keene's prophecy was fulfilled. She had not married—she had been married. The eagle had not spared the song-bird thrust in shadow of its wing.

The western skies had donned to greet her all the auspicious splendor of an autumn sunset. Old John Harriman and Althea were at the station to welcome her. Both exclaimed at her increased beauty. She was radiant, almost dazzling in her happiness. The charm of the bud

had not departed, but it was crowned with the glory of the perfect flower.

She lived through that first evening in her new home, as she had lived through all the hours since her marriage, like one in a dream. She married? She a wife? She could have laughed, or wept, at the unreality of it. She had never looked forward to marriage; never conceived its possibility in association with herself. Like many another unawakened girl, she had dreamed that she was not as other women, that love and marriage were not among her possibilities; and now that her pretty sophistries were shattered, her virgin soul stood confused and helpless, like a knight unarmored and disarmed. As the evening ended, and husband and wife were left alone together, she turned to Steele with startled, appealing eyes.

“ Steele,” she cried, “ it is beginning, the new strange life! All at once I realize the change, and the—the difference. I feel as if I must go back with Althea—as if I—I could not stay without her! What shall I do, Steele, what shall I do? ”

He folded her in strong, close, tender arms.

“ The change, little wife—is it an unhappy one? ” he asked her.

“ O no, no, no! not unhappy! ”

“ Is it a happy one, Isolde? ”

“ Ye-es! Only—only— ”

“ Only what, my sweetheart? ”

“ Only I am afraid, Steele, afraid! ”

He folded her more closely, bending his face till their lips met.

“ *Are you afraid?* ” he asked, softly.

The inflection of his voice carried her to his thought.

A radiance born of more than the shy blood mantling her cheeks was on her face.

“Perfect love casteth out fear,” she whispered. “No, I am not afraid, O my love, my love !”

For a month after their marriage their life was an idyl in which Steele bore his part feverishly, ecstatically—Isolde hers with quiet but ever deepening joy. It seemed to her in those days that she must step lightly and speak softly. Love was a sacrament, and her soul bowed reverently before it; but Steele partook of it boldly, rapturously, as the high-priest has right. She was his wife, his wife ! but with a thrill of excitement he realized that he was still the wooer. He had won much, but there was more, infinitely more, to win. There was an inviolate vestal reserve about her, even in her tenderest moments, which whetted him deliciously. The instinct of the hunter was in him ; the more elusive the prey, the keener his delight in the chase.

By almost imperceptible degrees they returned to the plane of practical life. Isolde relinquished her dreamful days to the dutiful return of her bridal-calls. Steele devoted his leisure hours to consultations with upholsterers and decorators, whom he summoned from Chicago in behalf of the “big house,” one of John Harriman’s princely wedding-gifts to Isolde. This spacious stone structure, situated upon an eminence overlooking the surrounding town, was set back some forty rods from the road ; the intervening green—threaded at one side by the carriage-road, in the centre by a gravelled foot-path winding from the gate to the house-entrance—being bordered with full grown cottonwood trees. Originally it had been erected for the summer palace of a millionaire speculator, whose financial ruin, however, compelled its

consignment to his creditors, just as the house was completed. John Harriman had bought it at auction, not at all because he aspired to such a palatial abode, but because he believed investment in Newfield estate to be the civic duty of every loyal Newfielder. He had furnished it plainly but comfortably, and for his sake Isolde had protested against any alteration in her honor; but Steele was good-naturedly inexorable. The simple garnitures had had their day, the reign of garish splendor must begin. The metamorphosed interior soon shone with omnipresent gilding and shimmered with plate-glass. Warm-hued Oriental rugs glowed on the inlaid floors; frescoed ceilings and tapestry-hung walls dazzled one with their brilliance. The appointments throughout betrayed lavish expenditure and ostentatious taste.

"I've caught the bird," he said, one day, jocosely, as Isolde expostulated against further outlay, "and, by heaven, I'll make the cage worthy of her."

He emphasized the words by drawing her to him, in a fond if masterful manner, and at the time she had smiled at them. But later, she shuddered as they recurred to her. More than once, as her married days went on, she felt that the gilded bars indeed were closing about her.

Old John Harriman accepted the transformation with unselfish delight. In the rooms set apart for his habitation, rooms endeared to him by fond associations, he had collected the familiar ornaments banished from the rest of the house; and with these about him, he spent many a happy retrospective hour. But perhaps he was still happier when, with the scent of Steele's cigar floating to him from lawn or library, he sat in a shadowy corner of the brilliant drawing-room, while Isolde played and sung

such simple old melodies as he loved. When the hour of music was ended, he pressed a long kiss on her brow, with a "Thankee, my dearie. Now go and spark a spell wi' Steele." Stealing off by himself then, with misty eyes and tremulous tender smile, to thoughts of youth and "mother."

To the simple old man with his reverence for all women, Isolde, with her soft voice and gentle ways, seemed indeed little short of an angel. But Steele, since the night when in the shadow of the moonlit pines, with the waltz-tune floating to him through the open door of Jenkins' barn, he had spoken the words which had won him his wife, and lost him eternally, irrevocably, all that could have made him worthy of her, had resolutely shut his eyes to the angel in her, and fixed them with passionate concentration upon the human woman. Her he loved almost fiercely, working himself into a feverish passion which for the hour absorbed him, flesh and spirit. The change was subtle, but Isolde, with insight born of love, divined it. Mute-lipped, she looked at him with wistful, questioning eyes. What was the struggle his strong man-soul was waging?

She dared not ask him in words, but her sympathetic arms stole shyly, tenderly about him.

"I want to be a good wife to you, Steele," she whispered, wistfully.

"Kiss me," he responded, passionately.

And she smiled and flushed, and did his tender bidding.

Was it not Love's?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HONEYMOON WANES.

But ere long the smile died and the flush deepened. Like other girls, and poets, she had dreamed of love in an abstract, impersonal fashion, but the reality was not what the dream had promised. She had dreamed of the strong sweet soul of love, of its pure true heart, of its ideal, immaterial aspect ; but it was not the ideal love, but the real love that now confronted her, and its aspect was human, only human ; and what, if not love, in all Christ's love-redeemed world, is divine ? The loving but virginal soul would not be bound, since love's bonds were of flesh. Its pure white pinions beat against their fetters, like birds' against the net.

Looking back upon her life as a girl, she could scarcely realize that she was the same Isolde who had lived so uneventfully from day to day, dreaming over her manuscripts, thinking her pure young thoughts, praying her girlish prayers, with no thought that the life now hers could ever reach her. When, at odd times, one susceptible youth or another had been fain to linger before her vestal shrine, she had retreated to her inner temple like Diana into the forest, and the real significance of the episodes had never touched her at all. In taking her by storm, Steele had adopted instinctively the only means by which she could have been taken. She was a vestal by nature ; and after three months of married life the oil of her vir-

gin lamp had not yet run out. She could not become reconciled to the fading of the flame, and kept herself in a perpetual fever in her efforts to preserve it. Had she resigned herself to extinguish it forever, to immolate the girl and the girl's creeds upon the altar of wifehood, she must have accepted life's new phase naturally, after the manner of her sister-women ; but such renunciation she found impossible. Day after day, spiritually as well as materially, she strove to re-enter upon the routine of her girlhood ; but, grasp its material features as she would, the divine essence that had been its life and sweetness escaped her. Even her writing suffered. After the first month of marriage she had endeavored to devote at least a few hours daily to her art, but she progressed so slowly that she was tempted to yield the effort in despair. Her inspiration, according to her intolerant judgment, was dead. She was like a bird that, straining to soar, finds its pinions fettered to the earth. One day she poured out her heart in this impromptu bit of verse, and then sinking her head upon her manuscript, broke into bitter sobbing :

Life was once an April day,
Youth its sun of golden ray :
Gentle as a maiden's years
In its smiles and in its tears.
O'er it hung in glints and gleams,
Golden-gray, a haze of dreams—
Hush'd and holy, as on wing
Pure young angels, hovering.
Innocence that knew not sin,
Like a lily bloomed therein ;
Calm as dove o'er twilight vale,
Peace abode on pinions pale.
Streamlets twain of mingled tide,

Faith and Hope, purled side by side ;
Thoughts, like reeds their brink along,
Echoing their spring-time song.
Tender creeds of tenets true,
Up their shores as roses grew,
Sowing wide, like summer seed,
High resolve and gentle deed.
White and warm as vestal fires
Glowed its passionless desires ;
Artless Joy like music blent
With the hush of sweet Content ;
Pure as incense on the air
Rose to heav'n its virgin prayer—
O my heart ! to hold for aye
Life that was an April day !

Love, the summer solstice, came !
Love, the ruddy ; Love, the flame !
Where calm was, and heavens fair,
Simoons pant, and fierce suns glare,
Youth's fair morning, ripe o'ersoon,
Forthwith flames to fervid noon ;
Olden dreams are woo'd in vain,
Bliss is drained to lees of pain ;
Thoughts are warring ; wild unrest,
Peace displacing, racks the breast.
Prayer, white-pinioned, loses worth,
Sullied plumes a-trail on earth.

True Love's cost—what may it be,
Loss or gain ?

O, answer ye,
Life erst human, now divine,
Cup of Love's transmuting wine ?
Soul Love-winged, that Godward leaps,
Heart a-surge with Love-loosed deeps ;
Mind illumed by Love's white flame,
Past unfaith, past fear, past shame ;
Flesh refined by purgers twain,

Love the bliss and Love the pain !
 Dreams new-born in dead dreams' place,
 Higher, purer, by Love's grace ;
 Meanings deep that light things take,
 Least one's greatest for Love's sake ;
 Eyes unsealed, that newly see
 How divine humanity !

Loss or gain ? Not thus we prove
 Heaven-born, incarnate Love !
 Love that claims as primal cost,
 Blind surrender, uttermost,
 Scales for low things. Love is high,
 Measureless infinity !

Sweeter, then, dare heart avow
 Loveless Once than sweet Love's Now ?
 Loveless Was, than Sweet Love's Is,
 Mourning apotheosis ?
 Love, forgive me—thine no less,
 Nay, thine more, for waywardness !
 Sun the shadows leaves behind,
 Love, its fears ! Meanwhile be kind,
 Tender still, O Love ! to me,
 Doubting not my fealty,
 Tho' my soul, in soar and slip,
 Force the fetter of mute lip,
 Sobbing like a child astray
 On some fair but unknown way,
 " Love, sweet Love, give back, I pray,
 Life that was an April day ! "

Old John Harriman, coming suddenly upon her and surprising her in her tears, divined the struggle her pure young soul was undergoing. To her he said only a few caressing words, but with Steele that night he had a long talk as they smoked together.

" I've hed my 'xsperience wi' wimmen-folks," he said,

“an’ naterally, I know better’r how ter take ’em. Mother, now, sleepin’ wi’ God this twenty year, mother was high-strung an’ sperrited-like, jest like ‘Soldy ; an’ that sort takes love hard. But its only a matter o’ time, my boy, only a matter o’ time. Jest ye use a little polocy—turn tail as a man, an’ sorter edge roun’ like a woman—kiss her hair inste’d o’ her mouth, an’ let her cry her cry out, jest sayin’ tender an’ woman-like, ‘Poor little ‘Soldy ! Poor little dear girl ‘Soldy !’ an’ in less ’n a week she’ll begin ter smile up shy-like, an’ sorter make out ter hersel’ as ye’re her own born’d mother ! Ye’ll see her peek up thro’ her tears sweet an’ bright as a rose-bud arter a shower. Wimmen-folks is cur’us critters. Thar ain’t no answerin’ fur their ways, nor a-follerin’ o’ their thinkin’s; an’ they ain’t all made arter th’ same pattern, nor out o’ th’ same ware, mind ye that ! Some on ’em ’s like common crock’ry ware—rough-usin’ don’t hurt ’em. Some on ’em ’s like that thar chiny vase—a breath ’ll break ’em. Now ‘Soldy, she’s chiny—chiny all over. Be tender wi’ her. Win her young heart ter ye, little by little. Th’ weddin’ ain’t th’ fun’ral o’ th’ courtin’—it’s th’ christ’nin’ o’ it, my boy, th’ christ’nin’ ! ”

The young man had listened without a word. As his father finished, he flung away his cigar, and with an abrupt “good-night,” went upstairs. Isolde was at her prayers. He paced restlessly up and down as he waited. When she rose there were traces of tears on her face.

“My father,” he said, curtly, “has been favoring me with a lecture—a lecture upon my treatment of you. I must deserve it if I have caused those tears. In what have I been wanting ? ”

His tone was more defiant than tender. It roused her spirit.

" You have been wanting in nothing," she answered. " Were it otherwise, be assured that I should not permit your father to 'lecture' you—in my behalf."

The pride of her attitude pleased him. He liked the sight of a high spirit subject to him.

" Brava for the proud little woman!" he laughed; "I admire your mettle, Isolde."

The good-natured answer, rough as it was, touched her.

" Steele," she said, " I should not have spoken to you in that manner. Forgive me."

She drew him into a chair, and kneeling beside it, rubbed her cheek childishly along his knee.

" You have been very tender, very generous with me," she said, " and you will be generous still, Steele, and patient, just a little longer? Other women seem to take the change naturally, but to me it is all new and strange and terrible. At first I was dazed—I did not realize it; but day after day the awful seriousness of the surrender, its responsibility, its irrevocableness, grows upon me. It awes me, Steele, it terrifies me! I want to realize it, I want to draw breath, and there is no time—no space—no freedom——"

She wrung her hands nervously. A sudden sob strangled her.

" I was never a girl who looked forward to marriage," she cried, " and the woman's life, the wife's life, frightens me. Marriage is an open sea, and I—I am not a brave sailor. I want to go back to shore, Steele, I want to go back to shore!"

He looked at her helplessly.

" My God!" he cried, " you are unhappy with me—unhappy!"

She shook her head in mute negation, but he did not

heed her. In his heart he felt a keen, shamed sting of bitter self-reproach. She had called him generous with her, but full well he knew that he had not been generous. He was not the man to have been that. There was an elusiveness about her which he had felt and resented. He had been pitiless in the suspicion that her surrender was even yet with a reserve. Many and many a time he had felt her fluttering like a bird in the net, and he had only gathered the meshes tighter. But to-night, realizing how helpless, how frail, how completely in his power she had been and was still, he felt a sudden tender pity for her.

“Marriage is an open sea, and I am not a brave sailor. I want to go back to shore, Steele, I want to go back to shore!”

It was so pathetic, that startled cry of the vestal soul—so pathetic, because so vain.

“What am I to do?” he asked, miserably. “You cannot go back. I need not tell you that. You must make the vogage as other women make it. But you are not as other women. You do not know what love is. I read a woman’s verse to-day, and thought of you. I would give—what would I not give—to have you write me such an one!”

He took the verse from his pocket, gazing eagerly at her as she read it.

Dear love of mine, if I should die to-night,
Close eyes on all the fair of earth—your face ;
Close lips on all the sweets of earth—your kiss ;
Close ears to all the song of earth—your voice,—
Think you my soul would seek the Infinite,
Swift-winged as lark on singing skyward flight,
Or linger still for this one sweet, last grace—
To feel again upon my lips your kiss,
To hear again the music of your voice ?

If I should die, if I should die to-night,
Within my soul this doubt, Love's human sin,
Or wide, or shut, the gates of jasper, pearl,
And golden courtway of the Great White Throne ?
"Thou blessed, in," would God the Son invite,
Or thunder, "Back, to Life, and Love's sure blight!"
And O, (sweet Christ, forgive !) my soul within,
Bewail'd or bless'd the curse, tho' He shouldst hurl,—
Sent it me back to thee, my love, my own ?

"The woman who wrote that, loves," he said. "I wish to God I could say as much of you. You chill me, starve me. I am hungry, Isolde, hungry, and your bread is a stone!"

"No! no!" she cried, like a creature in mortal pain.
"You misconceive—you wrong me——"

She struggled to her feet. From her eyes, in their mute pleading, looked at him resisting, yet entreatingly, her hunted soul, at bay !

"It is a true, sweet thought," she said, "that death cannot lessen love, but a narrow, unworthy, ignoble thought, unless it adds that death too, purifies it. Not to sink together, but to rise together, is the prayer of love immortal. O, my husband, do not doubt my love ! I love you. I am no longer my own—no longer myself. I am yours—I am you, Steele, you—not only for this little life, not alone in this poor perishable flesh, but for eternity, in God ; because our love is a sacrament, a union of souls of which this mortal union is only the faint brief symbol ! Think of me, think of our love, in this higher light ! Live for love, yes—but for the real immortal love, not for its poor, pale, sullied, human phantom. Sooner or later one of us two must be taken and one left. Should death choose me and the grave claim me, you would not love these lips you kiss so now ; you would

not fold these arms around you ; you would not hold this little body to your heart. You would shrink and shudder, should one small finger touch you. Is this your love, to end to-day, to-morrow ? Do you love me so little that you can give me up with life ? Is your love so degraded, so unworthy, that it prompts your soul not up, but down ? And my soul, Steele, made one with your soul—must it sink down with you ? Shall ~~my~~ eyes never lift above your human face ? It is a terrible thing for her and him, when a man stands between a woman and her God. If she loses Him, who shall find Him for her—and without Him, where shall she find the twofold strength that the woman should have in soul, as the man has in body ? We women stand like Mary at the Cross, the link between Christ and John. And heart to heart, each knowing each as His best gift, both must look—up."

Her eyes, in tearful supplication, were fixed upon his face. For one remorseful moment he hesitated. Then his passionate lips, like searing flames, fell on them, kissing them shut and blind.

Her appeal—was it in vain ?

Ask any man the question. Ask any woman the answer.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HONEYMOON FLICKERS OUT.

Christmas, the sweetest time of all the year—when the Bethlehem Star shines not only for the Judean shepherds, but for the wide, wide world as well, and prince and peasant bend knee together beside the omnipresent Crib ; when the angel-choirs sing unto all hearts hearing their heavenly message of peace and good-will to men ; and the Holy Child, from the breast of His Virgin Mother, holds eager hands to all who linger near—Christmas had come and gone, and with the dawn of the New Year, a new era for the bank began. It was enlarged and adorned to the superlative degree of splendor, and its glittering exterior was but the sign and symbol of the prosperity within. As the honeymoon waned, Steele became more and more absorbed in his financial ventures. These were not confined to the legitimate field of the bank, but extended to the quicksands of private speculation ; and a set of restless, eager-eyed men soon gathered about him, whose voices, floating to the drawing-room from the adjoining library, sounded ever the same refrain of “stock” and “share” and “bond.”

Isolde sighed as the voices reached her. These nightly conclaves from which she found herself debarred in effect, if not in fact, weighed upon her sensitive conscience. Was a wife’s sphere circumscribed even within its circumscriptions, she wondered ? Would not a wiser and worthier

woman associate herself with all the interests of her husband's life? She studied the financial columns in the newspapers and aired her newly acquired knowledge, only to be laughed at for her pains.

"There are 'numbers and numbers,' little woman!" Steele said to her. "If you invade my realm, I must invade yours; and then for poetry 'as is' poetry!"

"Now, Steele!"

"Now, Isolde!"

"But I want to—to—"

"But you 'want to be a good wife;' is that it, as usual? Yes, I thought so! Well, lips a little closer, arms a little tighter—now you are the best little wife in all the world!"

It was impossible, considering her nature, her youth, her inexperience, and her perfect love, undoubting and adoring as first love ever is, that this philosophy, repeated day by day, should not set its brand upon her susceptible and sensitive heart and soul. At first, imperceptibly, but later in visible transfiguration, the fire of his passion ignited her heart's white flame.

The change was betrayed less in her life than in her writing. Art is a mirror in which are reflected all the phases of the artist's life. The inspiration she had mourned as dead was revivified. She wrote, now, with a firmer hand and a fuller heart than had been possible for her before young life's pale bud had bloomed to love's red flower. Her earlier work had been vestal in its chastity. Now her awakened heart tuned her song in a more passionate key. She had reached the organ-stop of life—the *vox humana*. Her work was still chaste, but with a warm, sweet chastity, human to its core. And it was the human note that won her success. Not art, but heart,

makes the work immortal. Art is the beautiful body, but unless the artist's heart throb within it, a body without a soul.

Hence the artist, instinctively as unconsciously, plays upon his heart as a minstrel on his lyre ; holding its white strings up to use, threading his song with every quivering fibre. Identified with her art—the art which had been all her life before love had dethroned it—Isolde's love grew, sending out new shoots apace, new leaves and buds and flowers. Her vestal heart, that had been so shy of the seed of love, now fostered its bud till love's rank bloom over-grew it. It rioted over all her life and gave new color to it. It grafted itself on her life's stock. She began to live in a feverish love-dream. The sun shone love, the winds sighed love, the birds sang love. Her husband no longer complained of her coldness. The pale young spark at last had flamed to fire. Love, love, love was her dream, her thought, her prayer !

The honeymoon, that had waxed and waned, suddenly redawned. Lured by the domestic hearth's new warmth and radiance, Steele re-devoted himself to it with all a lover's assiduity. One January afternoon he left the bank at an earlier hour than usual, and surprised Isolde in her study.

“Think of an angel,” she said, gayly. “I was just writing a poem to you, such a poem as you once asked for. But, O, Steele, it is so poor, so weak, so failing ! It is not even the echo of the poem within my heart.”

He read it with his arms around her.

My life is in thy hand, O love ! My past,
My present, future, nest upon thy palm ;
Fold wings and bird-like, pipe their simple psalm,
Love consecrate to thee, first note and last.

Thine own to spurn ; thine own to hold love-fast ;
Thine own to doom to storm or gentle calm ;
To hold Pain's gall, or love's sweet draught of balm,
Or keep a thirst, as thine heart's edict hast.
Surrender sweet ; fraught with this single pain,
That soul, heart, voice, do night and day bemoan—
(Yet, O my love, though fall my tears like rain,
Though wails my sob as wind from zone to zone,
Both sob and tear alike in vain, in vain—)
That but one life is mine to make thine own !

He kissed it, and then her, tenderly.

“ My darling,” he said, “ I will not doubt your love.
You do love me, in your way, and your way is highest.”

An hour later they were cantering side by side along the Settlement road.

Across the blue expanse of sunlit heaven flitted, like white-winged angels, a train of clouds. The air, warmed by the afternoon sunshine, blew with a fresh crisp sweetness from its mountain caves. The frosty boughs of the cottonwoods tinkled as they blew against one another. The horses' hoofs struck resonantly on the frozen ground. Here and there bits of ice snapped up in iridescent particles. Where the highway merged itself in a road leading through pine-woods to the Settlement, a sunbeam slanting from the tree-tops turned the dusk-brown vista into gold. It hovered round their heads and lingered on their glowing faces. Across its radiance their happy eyes met. With a mutual impulse they leaned toward each other. The wind was sibilant with their kiss.

Their mood held the twofold sweetness of past and present. Steele thrilled anew with the sweetly torturous fire of love's primal flame. Isolde experienced again the heart-throb born of fear and faith, of dread and hope, of pain and bliss, which had been love's pang of birth.

With absolute abandon she yielded herself to her joy. The glow of the sunlight was within her, the wild, free spirit of the wind. The liquid laughter of a newly-thawed creek floated to them, and her laughter rippled with it, like a chord akin. Her voice supplied the music of the absent birds' song. She was youth, she was beauty, she was love and joy incarnate—the embodied spirit of the vivid, alluring, riotous day.

They rode on faster and faster. The wind swirled past them, tossing the boughs like bare brown arms above their heads. Icy twigs, crisp dead leaves, detached bits of frosty earth, snapped up around them, displaced by the gallant hoofs that sped like wings. In the exhilaration of the hour, new life surged through Isolde's veins. Without fatigue or effort she galloped on and on, till the labored breaths of the panting horses pleaded for a halt.

"On! on!" cried Steele, to the flying figure before him. "Your mad mood is irresistible, Isolde. I follow your wild lead to the death."

She reined in her horse. He overtook her. His shoulder pressed heavily against her. His breath was on her cheek.

"Siren! Sorceress!" he cried.

The brightness of her dancing eyes, as they turned upon him, softened into a sweeter light.

"Love!" he finished. "O my love, my love!"

A three minutes' canter brought them to the Settlement, its low pine-roofs outlined sombrely against the snow-clad mountain-range.

"A harnsum' couple," commented an admiring settler, watching them from his doorway, as they cantered by.

"A happy couple," amended his companion, and followed them with wistful woman-eyes.

They rode through the Settlement and beyond it to the

foot-hills, then turned about and retraced their way at an easy pace. In the heart of the Settlement Steele halted, as if struck by a sudden thought.

“By the way,” he said carelessly, “I may as well combine pleasure with business. A Denver chap, Kingsley, by name, was talking to me to-day about the old Red Ridge Mine, in which most of the settlers got badly bitten a few years since. I promised him I’d have a word with a few of them. If Midge will not stand, walk her up and down till I return.”

Before she could object he had hitched Ladybird, and disappeared in the “Shanty,” a structure half-tent, half-shed, which, as it included both bar- and card-room, was naturally the masculine headquarters of the place. For more than an hour Isolde paced up and down the long road, while the last rays of the setting sun faded into shadow, the shadow deepened to dusk. The wind grew chill. She shivered in it—not that she was cold in body, but its chill seemed to strike through the flesh to her inmost heart. She felt as if the sun of her happiness was setting in a dusk which no coming dawn would brighten—as if the day of her life was over, and its night begun. The reaction from her rapturous mood was only natural, but to her it seemed prophetic.

“I was too happy, too happy,” she cried to the darkening skies.

And the night crept on.

When Steele reappeared at last, he was flushed and noisy, and exchanged rude jests with the rough men who followed him to the door. As he joined her, Isolde turned away her face with a disgusted exclamation.

“You have been drinking,” she said; “drinking their horrible whiskey. O Steele, how could you?”

"Had to, to seal the bargain," he admitted, unguardedly ; then bit his lip in annoyed regret. He would have given all the whiskey in Colorado at that moment to have retracted the incautious admission.

"What bargain ?" she asked. "Surely you have not been buying that hopeless old mine ?"

"Buying up the Red Ridge ?" he laughed. "It is not worth a copper cent. That is what I have been ascertaining for Kingsley ; and the price I paid for the knowledge was a treat all round—of bad whiskey. Don't be alarmed, little wife, I can stand it. And, by the way, I have some good old brandy in my flask here. Better take a sip. You must be chilled and tired."

"I am wearing my heavy habit, and am not cold," she said, rejecting it ; "and you know quite well, Steele, that I disapprove your flask. It is full of a bad habit. Why do you carry it ?"

"Because I am a man, little woman," he laughed ; "or, rather, because I am not a woman ; which is, I suppose, at once the cause of, and an excuse for, all my masculine peccadilloes !"

To Isolde's surprise, Kingsley was waiting in the drawing-room when they reached home. He was a tall, slight, refined-looking man, bearing the unmistakable stamp of the great world. His pale, delicate face, lighted by melancholy dark-brown eyes, was crowned by a noble head of prematurely gray hair. He had a reserved, indifferent air about him which impressed Isolde favorably. It was a welcome contrast to the free-and-easy familiarity of the greater number of her husband's business associates. He dined with them, talking languidly and sometimes cynically upon many subjects. After dinner he disappeared with his host in his library, where they were clos-

eted together until long after midnight. In the mean-time Isolde was sobbing nervously in her room up-stairs. She felt suddenly ill, despondent, startled—she knew not what. She hid her face in her hands, and then unclasped her hands and wrung them in nervous anguish. She went down for Steele, but turned back from the library door without speaking to him. When he came up at midnight, however, she was sleeping peacefully, with the smile of a tender dream on her fair young face.

Two months later there was a sudden excitement in the Settlement. The Red Ridge Mine, which had been dead stock for some years, had leaped to the front. There was a rush for shares, and no shares were forthcoming. Unknown speculators had bought them up for a song, and the mine, properly worked, was proving a bonanza. The rumor did not reach Isolde for some time. When it did reach her, it fell upon unheeding ears. She was still absorbed in the tender dream that the annunciation-angel had brought her. One morning, however, by chance or fate, the matter was forced upon her notice.

She was standing in the library with her husband, who was gathering up some papers to be used that day at the bank, when the engineer, Jim Oakes, was ushered in. Isolde, who had not seen him since the night of the barn-dance, gave a startled cry, and ran to Steele's side. Jim looked crestfallen and foolish.

"I ain't a-goin' ter hurt him, marm," he said, "an' I makes my excuses fur ever a-runnin' him down. Sal, ez knows th' track ter th' end o' th' road, Sal sez ez how I nigh wreck'd th' hull caboose, an' I ain't above sayin' ez I mistook th' signals."

"Mistake them, you did, my man," assented Steele, "but your excuses are accepted. Is that all you have to say?"

"Keowketcher, no! I kem ter talk o' th' mine. Them theer shar's o' mine——"

Steele led Isolde to the door, and shut it after her.

"We will talk on the way to the bank," he said, taking up his hat.

Jim's brawny fist came down with a crash on the little smoking-table.

"We'll talk 'yer an' now," he said, "an' talk it out. Theer ain't no Sal ter stan' atwixt us 'yer. Them theer shar's o' Red Ridge ez old Jenkins traded fur my team o' burros, an' I swopped off, like th' darned fool-cuss I be, fur tarnation nuthin'—them theer shar's ter-day is wuth a fortoon!"

"What the devil is that to me?" asked Steele, savagely.

"Wot's it ter yo'? Yo' want ter know, do yo'? Wal, I'll tell yo'. It's so much capytal ter yo', Mr. Steele Harriman; its so many more fine windeys ter th' bank, an' so many more gran' fixin's ter hum. It's store-clo'es ter yer back, an' fancy vittuls in yer mouth. It's so much cash in yer pocket—that's wot it be ter yo'. If th' rest can't see thro' a tunnel, Engine Jim ken. D' yo' think I didn't sight yo'? Yo're a flyer, yo' be, but yo' can't beat me. Twar a put-up job."

Steele looked uneasy. The door had blown ajar. He shut it with a bang; then he gestured Jim to a seat, and took one opposite him.

"To begin with," he said, "do you know that I can prosecute you for libel? You have spread this story; I have heard it before to-day, and it is a d——d lie, every word of it. You would retract it, of course, should I give you the present price of your shares?"

"Ya-as, I reck'n so," admitted Jim, uncertainly.

“Let me have that promise upon paper.”

He went to his desk, and hastily wrote a few words on a sheet of legal-cap paper. Then he asked Jim to sign his name. When, with equal flow of ink and perspiration, the signature was finally appended, Steele folded the sheet and shut it in his wallet with a triumphant smile.

“The charge of libel is now supplemented by that of blackmail,” he said. “This paper will convict you in any court in the land. Both are long-term offences, my man.”

Jim scratched his curly head in open-mouthed bewilderment. He was unprepared for this turning of the tables. Nevertheless he held to his conviction.

“Twar a put-up job,” he reiterated.

“It was a put-up job,” assented Steele, “and I am your fellow-victim. I believed the old mine to be hopelessly dead stock, and negotiated for the settlers in friendship, setting a price upon their shares which, though comparatively small, was yet beyond their wildest dreams. When I saw that the mine was proving a good speculation, no one was more surprised, as no one was a heavier loser, than I. But I bear my loss like a man, not like a whimpering old woman. Now go and take back your lies, or I’ll have you in jail before night.”

The man shambled out, convinced and penitent. Steele, turning toward the door with a look of mingled triumph and relief, found himself face to face with Isolde. She was gastly pale, and her hands, as they clasped each other, trembled nervously.

“You remember,” she panted, “that on the evening following our ride to the Settlement I felt suddenly ill. I came downstairs for you. Mr. Kingsley was with you

in the library. I stood at the door hesitating to disturb you, and your words reached me. I did not guess their application, and they made no impression upon me at the time; but they have come back to me clearly, every one. You said, ‘The mine was never half-worked. There is a rich lode in it, I swear to you ! Halve the expenses, and I will halve the profits. Randal can be the cat’s-paw, and we will silence him with a small chestnut. The fire holds a fortune for us ! ’ ”

She pressed her trembling hands to her forehead.

“They are burning my brain,” she cried ; “they are ringing in my ears ; they are flaming before my eyes. You have deceived the poor creatures who have trusted you—you have enriched yourself by their ruin—you—you—”

He drew on his coat, and turned toward the door. His face was calm, cruelly calm ; but his eyes flashed ominously.

“I may not return to luncheon, since I am late in getting down-town,” he said. “Kingsley will dine with us.”

She sprung to the door and stood with her back against it.

“You are not going—like this ? ” she gasped.

“I am going ‘like this,’ now and always. Understand once for all, Isolde, that I deny your right, as a woman, to interfere in my business affairs. Moreover, I refuse to be called to an account by you or anyone.”

The latent strength in her gentle face seemed suddenly to assert itself. Her eyes were still appealing, but her lips were as lips of stone.

“I am not a child,” she said, “to be silenced by stern words. There is a duty I owe to others, a duty I owe to

myself, as well as a duty I owe to you, which forbids me to be accessory to this cruel wrong, even though my husband be the wrong-doer. Right your wrong, Steele, not because I ask you, but because your own soul demands it, and I will forget it. If you refuse, I—I must appeal to your father."

A terrible look flashed into his face, but he masked it with a sudden smile.

"Our first quarrel, and over a mere trifle!" he laughed. "My dear, this is a bad precedent. The fault, however, is mine. I should have explained the matter clearly to you at first, but that boorish fellow upset my temper. The bargain was an honest one. The shares were dead paper in the men's pockets. They sold them voluntarily and we paid a good, even a generous, price for them. The purchase was a foolhardy risk, which had only my blind and unreasonable faith in the mine to excuse it. The after-work was at our expense; the possible, the probable loss we were prepared to bear alone; therefore, we were entitled to the unexpected gain. The affair is simply a business transaction, shrewd and hard perhaps, to a woman's thinking, but legitimate in law, and honorable. A thousand such are transacted openly every day. I did not care to appear in the matter, simply because it is not wise for a banker to be known as a speculator; moreover, I knew that, in case of success, I should be besieged for shares, and Kingsley made it a condition of his investment that we should keep the mine in our own hands. For the first time, Isolde, you have demanded that your husband should justify himself to you. It must be your last demand of the kind."

She drew a long breath of relief. He was not at fault, then, after all. His deed was lawful, according to a man's

hard creed, though irreconcilable with a woman's standard of right and justice. She lifted her clasped hands and leaned them on his shoulder.

"Forgive me if I exaggerated your wrong," she said, "but it still seems a wicked, cruel wrong to me. Repair it, Steele; ill-gotten wealth will bring no blessing. Restore the shares or their equivalent—for my sake."

He led her to a chair, and pressed his lips lightly on her forehead.

"Not even for your sweet sake, my dear," he said, "can I, in the present state of the bank, afford to be quixotic. The National is crowding me fast and furiously, and in keeping well ahead of it, I have taken more hurdles than I can well clear. To be plain with you, the Red Ridge profits have saved the bank from ruin, the banker from disgrace."

He whistled a gay air as he sauntered out. At the door he lighted a cigar and walked down the path, puffing at it jauntily.

But hours afterward Isolde still crouched where he had left her, her bright head bowed on the leather arm of the library chair.

CHAPTER XV.

A MIDNIGHT TOAST.

The point at which love ceases to be blind is not clearly defined. Sometimes the life of disillusion bursts suddenly upon dazzled eyes ; sometimes it dawns and deepens in almost imperceptible gradations. In such gradations, unconsciously to Isolde, disillusion had crept upon her. Spiritually, the husband had not fulfilled the promise of the lover. His sin, like a cancer day by day eating deeper into the sound white flesh, had meshed his soul in its toils. He could not hide his deterioration. The time came when even Isolde's eyes, though the glamour of love was on them, could no longer be blinded to it. The hours, as she crouched in the library chair, were hours of death-agony. When she rose, her breast was the shroud, her heart the grave, of Faith's fair young dream.

In spite of her efforts to conceal the change, it was not long before her husband realized that love's roseate fillet had fallen from her eyes. He was still her idol, but she had discovered his feet to be of clay. At first the realization caused him a pang of almost unendurable pain, but as his deterioration went on, the pain faded to a light regret. Not that he loved her less. Sometimes he fancied that his love grew with every hour of his life, every throb of his heart ; but his moral sense was blunted. The consciousness of his unworthiness no longer tortured him. To the stab of conscience his sin-drugged spirit was benumbed.

The honeymoon, which had waxed and waned, been revivified and waxed anew, now waned forever. He watched it flicker out with an unconscious sigh of relief. Love's fever had been fierce, if brief ; love's calm was welcome. Uncertainty was replaced by assurance, novelty by habitude, fancy by reality. With the impetuous self-surrender to the pursuit of the moment, which was characteristic of him, he now abandoned himself to his financial ambitions. His clear brain, his natural speculative aptitude, his ambition, daring, unscrupulousness—above all, his "devil's luck," tended to make him the central figure in the group of speculators whom he had attracted about him. Almost without exception these were financiers whose name and fame, enviable or otherwise, were known throughout the West. The fact that such men, old in the world to which he was a new-comer, not only looked at him, but up to him, he found intoxicating. Leadership had been, in a measure, forced upon him. Since he had accepted it, he must, he would hold to it, for life or death ! A few of his associates were his friends as well as their own ; the greater number were their own exclusively. These spurred him to a reckless gait, following cautiously in his footsteps. He was far too clever to degenerate into their cat's-paw, as Randal had degenerated into his, and the chestnuts he pulled from the fire were his own, but he did not obtain them unburned. His wounds were slight, but on young flesh slight wounds tell. It was to heal their scars that he had plunged so recklessly into the Red Ridge mine.

Foremost among the few men specified as his friends, loyal and comparatively disinterested, stood Ralph Kingsley. Since their first chance meeting through an associate named Rundell—a meeting which, having been un-

der feminine, but not reputable feminine, auspices (though surely this is a paradox), it may be as well not to describe—the men had been drawn to each other by a mutual attraction which intimate acquaintance seemed to intensify. A few days after the excitement attendant upon the Red Ridge boom had subsided, Kingsley returned to Newfield, from which, at the time, he had beaten a discreet retreat, and sought Steele at the bank.

“Bad news,” he began, without preface. “Rundell recalls his loan.”

“The deuce!” ejaculated Steele. “What’s up?”

“He has a bigger spec on hand—lands in the direction of the C., B. & Q.’s proposed branch-road. I suggested a ‘combine’ for you without success.”

“What was his ground for refusal?”

“It was ‘wine in and truth out’ with him. He said he had been a fool and let you into too much already.”

“He’ll let me into more before I have done with him. Recalls his loan, does he? Well, he gets not a d—d cent. And I will have a finger in those lands, or swamp them. My eye has been on them all along. Will you go into them with me?”

“Impossible. I am drowned fathoms deep in oil.”

“All right. I’m equal to them.”

“What will you raise on?”

“On the devil, if nothing better turns up. It is win or die with me. You don’t half know me yet, old fellow.”

“No,” admitted Kingsley, “I do not half know you.”

This short interview revealed the young banker’s character to him in a new light. He had known him socially as “a good fellow”—the social misnomer for a bad one—and in the Red Ridge Mine transaction had discovered him to be as unscrupulous as he was daring. But to defy

Rundell implied more than daring. He was a man with whom few cared to interfere; a gross, surly, iron-willed man, a wily financier, and, politically, a power. The young banker's attitude toward him implied a latent strength which Kingsley had not suspected, and which he both liked and admired. Steele was conscious of the favorable impression he had made, and confirmed it. He retained the loan, and had more than one finger in the railroad-land pie, as well.

At about this period a new era in the social life of the Harriman house began. In the early days of her marriage, Isolde had sighed because the door of the library seemed to shut her out from a phase of her husband's life. Now she sighed because the door was opened. Library and drawing-room were now as one, and the strident voices formerly subdued by distance now rang in coarse, rude accents in her ear. For a little space she submitted in dazed fashion, but ere long she awoke to the fact that she had been made the centre of a circle the outskirts of which, a year earlier, she would have shunned as contamination. She appealed to her husband, and he laughed at her; to Althea, and was met by stony unconsciousness and misconception. More than once she felt sorely tempted to appeal to Ralph Kingsley. There was something about him that convinced her, even against the evidence of her own eyes and ears, that he was not like his companions. Inadvertently, she had probed beneath the cynical surface, and found the under-grain good. He was conscious of her discovery, and she was conscious of his consciousness. A secret sympathy and understanding between them was the natural result—one which as yet, however, they realized but dimly. Their conscious attitude toward each other was one of mutual

uncertainty. Against the good she suspected in him was the evil she knew ; while on his side, he could not forget that she was a woman ; a title which, unfortunately, one sharp lesson in his earlier life had taught him to hold in small respect.

Newfield, meantime, was not unobservant of the wheels within wheels whirling under the impetus of Steele Harriman's hands. It was whispered that the Newfield Bank was not the only bank that represented his interests ; and that these, unconfined by bank-walls, were threading, like strong quick fibres, the financial heart of the West. These masculine whispers, overheard by quick feminine ears, lost nothing in the repetition. Newfield generally, even Newfield individually, began to feel a personal pride in the bank and banker, shining in reflected light, financial and social, with amusing complacency.

"That thar's my bank—th' Newfield bank—Harriman's!" the local inhabitant would boast, an upward and outward sweep of his brawny thumb indicating the bank to some open-mouthed country cousin.

"There goes cump'ny-folks ter the big house—more cump'ny-folks!" was the daily feminine remark, as the Harriman carriage, filled with guests, dashed through the town. In fact, the big house became the cynosure of the local Argus eyes. Isolde shrunk from the eyes in dread and fear. What might not they discover ? Her dread, her fear, were the more cruel because they were undefined.

As Newfield grew observant, Dr. Keene, whose intimacy with Isolde had lessened since her marriage, re-established it with frank determination, and began to appear almost nightly in the Harriman drawing-room, the reverend Druce often by his side. At first Isolde

ascribed the change to an old man's whim ; but when she discovered that the whim was not indulged without a motive deeper than she had suspected, she shrunk from him, as if resenting his presence, with startled regret and shame. Later on, however, as her need of such loyal service as his grew greater, she looked up into his rugged old face with grateful eyes.

" You are so good, so good ! " she cried, incoherently. But the doctor understood.

Steele smiled at first at the incongruous appearance of the doctor and Druce in the drawing-room, whose other frequenters were of such contrasting types ; but later on he began to regard the constant presence of the two men with resentful suspicion.

" Are they your body-guard ? " he asked Isolde, one night, when he had felt their presence more than usually irritating.

The words were a tacit admission of the position into which he had forced her—an unwise admission, since she had endured in silence only because she believed herself to be the victim of chance, rather than of deliberate intent.

" You realize, then, that I am in need of a body-guard ? " she said, slowly. " Until now I have hoped, I have believed, even, that you did not realize it. Steele, what is left me of faith and honor ? "

" Ask me something easier, my dear. That style of problem went out with the ark."

She scarcely heard the scoffing answer. What was left her of faith and honor ? she had asked him. But this was not the complete question. Faith, honor—there was one thing more.

" What is left me of—love, Steele ? " she sobbed.

“This—and this—and this!” he cried, kissing her protesting lips to silence.

Aye, such alone are the lees of love, be faith and honor spilled!

Steele was a genial host, even to the unwelcome guest, and from his manuer, neither Druce nor Dr. Keene could suspect his distaste to their presence under his roof. Some of his guests, however, were less courteous. The old doctor was inoffensive, in spite of his gruffness; but the mere presence of the pale, pure-faced young minister was found intolerable by many of the frequenters of the house, and these did not even feigu to conceal their antipathy. More than once Druce’s cheeks had flushed, and his soft eyes flashed, under the stab of an open sneer; but the eyes were veiled, and the proud young blood controlled, by the grace of “Jesus, meek and humble of Heart.” Here was an acre, perhaps the most precious in his Master’s vineyard. Should he leave the vine to its untrained way, because the weeds resisted him? The doctor’s care was all for Isolde; the minister’s for Steele. He saw that the world and the flesh had snared the fallen soul, but he believed that their triumph would be but brief.

One night it chanced that the two outstayed the other guests, a discussion having arisen from the doctor’s derisive account, resented by Druce, of a Methodist revival in an adjacent settlement. Druce’s creed was orthodox; the doctor, a religious man but not a religionist, upheld the broad creed which neither questions Divinity nor judges humanity, but is content to leave all ends, like all beginnings, to an infinitely wise, as infinitely merciful God.

“The Methodists are a great sect,” said Druce. “If

we do not wholly agree with their preaching, at least we can honor their practice. The Catholics were the pioneers of church and creed ; the Methodists of religion, pure and simple. They brought Christ down from heaven, changed Him from a God into a real, live, toiling, suffering, human brother-Man, set Him face to face with every man, woman and child, whose human lives were divinized thereafter. If their methods are, as the doctor says, theatrical, so are Nature's ; so are Human Nature's. There is tragedy, drama, comedy, in every phase of natural and human life. The circuit rider was father to the pastor, the founder of all Protestantism in the West, to-day. Honor to him, and to his followers ! ”

“ Bravo, Druce ! ” said Steele, “ the Methodists have a recruit. “ Suppose you mount the bench, and give us your experience.”

He threw himself at ease upon a low couch, exhaling the smoke of his cigar with slow enjoyment.

“ Methodist or Puseyite, Unitarian or Presbyterian, Jew or Catholic, what's in a name ? ” he said. “ Religion is a jewel precious not in itself, but in its setting. Your charming personality, for instance, dear your Reverence, makes your religion a ‘ pearl of price ! ’ ”

Druce took leave, somewhat abruptly ; the doctor followed him. Isolde looked after them with sorrowful shamed eyes. When the door was shut upon them, she stole to her husband's side, and slipped her hand in his with much of the shy tenderness of earlier days. She felt that the minister was disappointed in him. With a woman's loyal impulse she enlisted on the losing side.

“ You were only jesting, I know, Steele, ” she said, “ but the jest was a scoff. Tell me that you did not mean it—that you do not think religion is—nothing.”

“I think as I said,” he answered, making room on the couch, and drawing her down beside him. “Religion is just what and only what the professor makes it: hypocrisy in the hypocrite, cant in the Pharisee, truth in the fanatic.”

“Truth in the sincere Christian, you mean.”

“The sincere Christian is the fanatic; his Christianity an ecstatic, hysterical fancy; but truth to him.”

“And not to you? Then you are not a Christian? What are you, Steele?”

“I am a man, my dear: a man of the world; a man of the world of to-day. I profess nothing, I deny nothing. As truth is, let it be. I do not oppose it. I simply claim freedom, public and private: freedom to think as I choose, to speak as I choose, to act as I choose—and this claim I assert against even you.”

“Not against me, Steele; do not deceive yourself; but against your own best and highest self—against your God!”

“God! The old Word! the old Name! the old unanswering answer!

“The all-answering answer, you mean! Above Him, beyond Him, is who, what?”

“No one, nothing, for you, my sweet, I admit! You are—a woman.”

“Yes, a woman—‘woman, a helper,’ as Scripture has it. I begin to think that the revised Testament should read, ‘a helper-up!’”

“Up to what, to whom? he asked, passionately. “To God and Christ, you will say. What can God and Christ ever be to humanity but myths?—the Christian myth of to-day, replacing the pagan myth of yesterday, to be replaced by the scientific myth of to-morrow. Not God,

but man, is the one reality of this little life, and to make each day an earthly heaven—this is the best life holds—life, to a man, is not what a woman conceives it—a mere succession of days and nights and seasons, a round of duty, a dull routine of toil. These pave the track ; life is the exultant racer that speeds along it. Life means to a man the surge of hot blood through his veins, the thrill of his virile flesh, the throb of his strong heart, the leap of his quick pulses. It means the glorious freshness of youth, the vigor of health, the strength and conscious power of maturity. It means the slow, delicious awakening out of dreamless sleep to the glow and fragrance of morning—the plunge into sparkling waters, the dash into dewy air. It means the seductive lassitude that steals on with the night ; the relaxation of tense muscles ; the stretch of languorous limbs on soft couches; the sensuous passage through lotos-realms that bridge both sleep and waking ; the slow, resistless drifting of an active brain over the falls of dreamland into the deeps of sleep. It means the rush and crush of the great human world ; the splendid whirl of the rival wheels of trade, profession, art, finance, politics. It means the grapple of brain, the strife of hands, the competition of skill, the pitting of forces. It means the revolving cycle of risk, gain, loss, failure, triumph, downfall and uprising, defeat and victory, struggle and rest, war and peace, pain and pleasure. It means the wrestle, the race, the chase, the joust, the tourney. It means the rattle of dice ; the flash of cards ; the spell of chance. It means the glow and sparkle, the warmth and exhilaration of wine ; the dream of love ; the fever of passion. To be a man—God ! It is heaven enough. Let hell come after !”

On a salver at hand stood a bottle of wine with a long-

stemmed glass beside it. He sprang toward it, and filling the glass to the brim, lifted it to his lips.

“A toast,” he cried, “a man’s toast, to the man’s life! It is—‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die!’”

Solemnly, as if resounding the evil words to heaven, over the silence, broken only by the moan of the night-wind through the cottonwoods, the church-clock tolled the midnight hour.

Those twelve strokes were the knell of Steele Harriman’s better life. Hitherto his soul had fluttered between earth and heaven, like a moth between rushlight and star. Thenceforward its wings strained no more toward heaven. World-bound, flesh-bound, they failed, and sunk to earth.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAGDALEN.

Material life is a barometer whose sensitive mercury responds to every subtle fluctuation of the soaring or sinking spirit. Therefore it was inevitable that this episode in Steele Harriman's spiritual life should cast its material reflection. With his own hand he had slain Isolde's faith in him. Bereft of its pure ideal to which to live up, in masculine consequence, he lived down. Isolde watched him, dizzily. She scarcely realized the terrible change, its revelation had been so sharp and sudden. Life had been all song and golden sunshine, and in the space of one sharp lightning-flash the sun had set forever, and only darkness was left.

Shut out by love—for Steele grew morose and moody—she fled to her writing for relief, as the sufferer to the anodyne of his pain; surrendering herself with the abandonment of despair, to her art. But woman or artist, love or art—who shall doubt the stronger? There were hours, days, weeks together, when she spurned her manuscript with passionate hand, and flung away her pen, crying out that she would dissemble no longer, that heart was all, and brain nothing; that she would sell her art, as Esau his birthright, for the sweet warm human pottage her human heart was hungering for. But later came the reaction. Artist-like, she was a creature of moods; reflective, superficially, of outer influences as a river-surface of

overhanging skies. She felt strong, happy, triumphant, as she took up her pen. A fount of inspiration seemed suddenly loosed within her. This was life—this subtle, intoxicating consciousness of the creative power, that was quickening pulse and brain. Love! What was love but a brief, sweet, human dream? Art was the one, true, imperious passion of an artist's life.

From morning till night she wrote with feverish eagerness; but the work if crude, was strong and vivid, and found favor with press and public. One day she dashed off a poem of more than ordinary passion and power, and submitted it to Dr. Keene, who, though he had warned her of "the cost and the pain," was, nevertheless, her literary mentor. He returned it.

"Your soul is in a transition-state," he wrote, "and your Muse is in travail with it. Give her time, and she will come forth with new and ripened powers. Deliver her prematurely, and her youth, her strength, her spontaneity will be slain forever. You can afford to wait. Your genius is immortal."

She was musing over this message when her husband came in, and playfully taking the note from her hands, read it in spite of her protests.

"I forbid you to subject yourself—or me—to another such impertinence," he said, tearing it into shreds which he contemptuously flung away. "You write for the public, let the public judge your work. And now off with the blue-stockings, and on with the jewels. Rundell has wired, announcing an inroad of guests by the evening train."

The guests arrived duly. All, with the exception of Rundell, were strangers to Isolde, but of a type she already knew too well. They were familiar in address, flashy in

attire, coarse in jest, and all deep drinkers. She excused herself from the table as soon as possible. When they joined her in the drawing-room they were visibly under the influence of wine. At her husband's command she gave some music, and then escaped to her room. When he followed at midnight, he was hilarious, and slightly incoherent.

"They're slap-down good fellows," he said, enthusiastically, "and represent a dozen millions between 'em. That Rundell's the black sheep of the lot, but I can't afford to offend him. There's a few women connected with 'em one way and another, and he's proposed bringin' 'em down here, over Sunday. They mayn't be just your style, but we've got to make the best of it—sabe? They're a gay crowd, and I don't want my wife to be outshone, mark that. Order some scrumptious rigs, if you're out of 'em, and don't be afraid of the cash. I'll stand it."

The guests arrived on the following Saturday. Isolde, with frigid courtesy, received them. The women were three in number, all handsome, all vivacious in manner, all extravagantly attired. Before they had been an hour in the house, Isolde was overlooked entirely, but about their host they radiated like satellites around a sun. When, dinner being ended, Isolde gave the eldest of the three the customary signal, she openly laughed at her.

"Not if I know it," she said. "The twin P's—parlor and piano, I suppose; a paraphrase upon 'Home, Sweet Home,' or the 'Last Rose,' with a pathetic tremolo in the last verse. Many thanks, but I prefer a cigarette—and your husband."

"And her husband prefers you—and a cigar," laughed her host, lighting a weed as he spoke. "A cigar is to a man what love is to a woman—the material germ of a

rapturous dream which kindles, flames to fire, and—flickers out ; ending in both cases in a puff of smoke, and—ashes ! ”

“ And then ? ” questioned one of the women.

“ And then—the man lights a fresh cigar, the woman takes a new lover, and the old dreams are dreamed over. Dreams ! dreams ! dreams ! Life is a dream, love is a dream, death is a dream ! The only reality is—nothing.”

“ *Apropos* of what, Harriman—or rather of whom ? ” queried Rundell, daringly. “ A man’s, even a married man’s cheap cynicisms and negative philosophies are said to have a feminine ‘ *raison d’être*. ’ ”

“ Naturally,” replied Steele, his eyes fixed on the woman at his right hand—the youngest and by far the handsomest woman of the three—“ since femininity is the universal ‘ *raison d’être*. ’ Theology has it, ‘ born of God ! ’ Physiology, which is the theology of our material modern age, says ‘ born of woman ! ’ ”

“ Hush ! ” cautioned the oldest and boldest woman, tapping his lips with her cigarette. “ No naughty speeches here ! Mrs. Harriman’s ‘ologies do not include ambilogy.”

“ Toddle along, Isolde,” laughed Steele, “ since you’re not a smoker. We’ll join you later.”

“ Yes—much later ! ” laughed the second woman.

Isolde did not hear her. She had already dropped the portière behind her, seized a wrap that lay on one of the chairs, and darted from the house.

The wind blew bleakly through the leafless cottonwoods. Between their ghost-like trunks, snows, like trailing shrouds, were drifting. With trembling hands she caught up her train, and sped down the path, out the gate, into the dark Ledge-road. The sky was starless and

lowering ; stray flakes of snow began to fall—harbingers of a coming squall. The wind beat her back, stinging her face and freezing her breath upon her parted lips, but she pressed on resolutely. The fierce bark of a watch-dog, aroused by the light fall of her feet on the frosty ground, stilled her heart with terror. Once she heard the sharp cry of a famished cayote, astray from its prairie herd. She paused, shaking with fear and cold, but she would not turn back. Her love, her faith, her pride, were outraged. She shrunk from the tender memories of the past with burning cheeks and lowered eyelids. She shrunk from the future with a shuddering heartsickness such as only a white soul threatened by the mire can know. What further outrage it held for her she too clearly foresaw.

A sudden choking anguish was in her throat. She clutched it with both hands, and gasped hysterically. The sky, the trees, the barren ground, whirled above, around, beneath her. She staggered, and struck against a rough pine-trunk. A frost-sharpened splinter pierced her shawl, and buried itself in her upper arm's soft flesh. She moaned, and her pale lips trembled pathetically. Poor little white bruised arm ; how round, how soft, how fair it was. How piteous that such young, fair, frail things must suffer. She pressed her lips to the wounded place, and kissed it pitifully. The hurt flesh shuddered from even their soft touch. In a flash her face grew hard and bitter. What was the bruise of body to the death-hurt of heart and soul ? She was glad that the soft flesh pricked and burned and shuddered. O, that everyone, everything, in this bad, hard, cruel world, might suffer—suffer—suffer ! “ *The pain of the world !* ” Once, she had wept over the words ; now she gloated over them. They

soothed her, eased her, made her laugh, laugh, laugh ! The wild peal startled her. She clasped her hands to her ears, and crouched down on the frosty ground, racked with strangling sobs. O God ! she was so wicked ! O God, forgive her ! O God, take away her heart's wild maddening pain !

When she reached the Ledge-gate she was panting and could scarcely drag herself to the door. It was unlatched, and she pushed it back and fell in blindly. Althea was at supper. She uttered a cry of surprise when she saw her sister's face. Isolde staggered to her and fell weakly into her arms.

A glass of wine revived her. Slowly the color crept back to her lips. She motioned away the refilled glass, and sobbed out her piteous story. Before she had finished it Althea had ordered the carriage to the door.

“ You must go back,” she said firmly. “ To yield will be to conquer.”

Isolde yielded.

They reached the house just as the party in the dining-room rose from the table. Althea drew her sister into a sheltered recess of the brilliant drawing-room. The two elder women, with wine-brightened eyes and wine-flushed faces, still rotated about their host ; but his eyes were eagerly following the third woman, a pale, proud, beautiful young creature, who turned from him with almost insolent indifference, and sought Isolde.

“ Your gown is quite wet,” she said, “ and you are shivering. Have you been out ? ”

Suddenly a look of pained comprehension flashed into her face.

“ We frightened you,” she said in an undertone, “ and you ran away from us. Your sister brought you back.”

Isolde did not answer. The girl misunderstood her silence.

“ You need not shrink from me,” she said, with proud sadness. “ My touch will not pollute you. I am on the brink, yes ; but, as yet, I have not crossed the chasm ! ”

Isolde heard the words, after a dull, unconscious fashion, but she failed to comprehend them. A death-like languor encompassed her, deadening even the cruel pain in her heart. Magdalen bent to her pitifully.

“ Slip upstairs ! ” she said, with a quick glance about her. “ You can escape unnoticed. I will make your excuses.”

When the draggled train had disappeared up the curve of the winding stairway, the girl turned to her host.

“ I have sent your wife upstairs,” she said. “ She was looking pale and tired. She left her excuses with me.”

He fancied that she sneered as she spoke, and started toward the stairs with an ugly frown on his face. Magdalen recalled him.

“ Are you going to call her back ? ” she asked, reproachfully, “ and prove all my *finesse* wasted ? To be frank, I suggested that she leave us to—her husband. I”—with a bewildering upward glance of her beautiful wine-brown eyes—“ I wanted him to myself.”

Isolde was left in peace.

CHAPTER XVII.

FROM FLAME TO ASHES.

On Monday the guests departed. Steele accompanied them to Denver, and did not return until Tuesday, when he went directly from the station to the bank. There, in the late afternoon, Althea called upon him. He was not in a brotherly mood, but this obvious fact, Althea, with sisterly assurance, disregarded. She did not protest, as he expected, against a repetition of the episode of the previous Saturday evening. On the contrary, she congratulated him upon his certain exemption from protest, in case of such repetition, assuming the inevitability of Isolde's absence from the scene to be granted. That he was not insensible to the covert threat of her specious words, his savage scowl betrayed. Althea met the scowl with a smile, and dismissing the delicate subject, introduced another, this time a personal one. He listened with attention. As she concluded, he congratulated her. He congratulated himself, likewise. The bad quarter of an hour which he had been dreading from Isolde, would now be on Isolde's side.

He entered the house unnoticed, and surprised her at her desk. She submitted to his kiss of greeting but did not respond to it. As she was about to speak he took the initiative, warned by her face that he could not afford to yield the advantage that Althea's confidence had given him.

"Althea has been here," he asserted. "Did she tell you anything of special interest?"

"Of interest to me?" she asked. "No."

"Of interest to herself and George, I mean."

"No."

He was pacing the little study with restless feet. His hands were unsteady. His face and eyes showed traces of dissipation.

"She has applied for a divorce," he said. "George does not oppose it. In fact he submits most gracefully, and has made over the Ledge to Gay, and settled a snug little sum upon Gay and Althea, jointly. In consequence, things will go on much as usual, for the present at least; and the divorce will be a strictly private one, unknown outside of family and court. There will be no scandal, no publicity. Althea has done wisely, as usual; 'wisely, and,'—though you will not admit it—'well.' The divorce is the best thing for her, under the circumstances."

From her pale lips came no protest. After her first irrepressible start of surprise she had betrayed no emotion. She believed that she felt none. Her heart seemed dead within her.

"Her alleged ground—fictitious, of course," he continued, "is desertion. She is a hard woman,—our handsome Althea; yet I think George loves her still. I venture to assert that, sooner or later, matters between them must have righted themselves in orthodox fashion, but for our marriage."

"I do not understand," she roused herself to say.

"As my wife you have opened a new social vista to Althea. She has a quick eye for the main chance, and worships wealth. George's moderate means and lack of ambition have always galled her. I suspect—it is only a

suspicion, mind—that she has sighted a golden bait, and means to nibble at it."

" You mean that she will marry again ? "

" Not necessarily. I mean that she prefers to be free to marry again."

" With her husband alive ? "

" With her husband, as her husband, dead. The divorce is the funeral-rite of the marriage-tie ; its legal seal the clod on the coffin. The corpse, like other dead, is left to the graveyard ! "

She looked up dizzily.

" 'To have and to hold'—'for better, for worse'—'till death us do part ! ' What do the words mean, Steele," she cried, "since they do not mean what they say ! "

He traced the pattern of the carpet with his foot, in embarrassed silence.

" I must go to Althea," she said, rising.

He held her back gently, but firmly.

" No," he said, " you must not go to Althea. She forbids expostulation. She knows that to hear you, would be to hear what she could not forgive."

" But the little child, Steele ! the little child ! For his sake we must save her."

" It is too late to save her. You force me to tell you what I hoped to conceal. I put the case in the future to break it more gently ; in truth, it is of the past. The divorce was granted this morning. Hang the woman ! I wish she would make her own confessions. Long ago she asked me to tell you ; but I have been a coward, and spared you ! "

" Spared me ! " she repeated, bitterly. " Have you ? "

Her significant tone incensed him. He turned upon her almost brutally.

"Quit that firing from ambush!" he said. "We will have it out, face to face, once for all. You refer, of course, to the little affair of the other night. That it was unpleasant for you, I acknowledge: that it was the insult you chose to consider it, I deny. The Rundell crowd is a gay one, as I forewarned you; but I explained that I could not afford to offend him, and you should have helped me out of my difficulty—not made it harder for me. The women are not your style—God forbid! I admit, even, that they are slightly off-color. Nevertheless, they are by no means what you think them. They belong to a fast set, whose ethics you do not understand. Of course, I would not choose them for your associates. Probably you will never meet them, nor any like them, again. On the other hand, it is possible that such society must occasionally be forced upon you. The West is not the East. The social pace is faster here: the social rein more lax, the social field wider. If the society I move in is distasteful to you, I am sorry; but you should have thought of that before you entered it. Your social adaptability was one of the charms which first attracted me to you. Do not force me to realize that it was a spurious one."

Her pale lips made no answer, but bitter tears welled slowly to her eyes. Steele and Althea, her two nearest and dearest, seemed going from her, into a world of evil whose paths she could not tread. A clicking sound roused her from her sad reverie. As she looked up, her husband dropped over her shoulder a jeweller's case, in which, from a bed of ruby velvet, flashed dazzling diamonds. For a moment she sat in silence, gazing blankly at the glittering baubles. Then rising with calm, proud dignity, she shut the case, and held it toward him.

"All are said to have their price," she said, "but mine is higher than you think. These do not cover it."

He caught the jewels from her hand, and hurled them to the floor.

"You rank yourself too high," he sneered. "As a woman, your price fluctuates with your beauty. Perhaps you do not know that you have gone off damnably, of late. After all, you are quite right. Diamonds would not become you. They are fatal to beauty—in its wane."

He rang the bell imperatively, and waited in sullen silence. When the maid appeared, he pointed to the jewels.

"Pick those up, and hand them to Mrs. Harriman," he said.

The maid obeyed with a frightened face.

"Th' boss was in one o' his white tantrums," she confided a few minutes later, to the still faithful Jehu. "I was that flustered as I nearways dropped 'em, arter a-picking 'em up. I wouldn't be in Mis' Harriman's shoes, not fur all th' di'mants in Californy."

"Di'mants beant ev'rythin'," insinuated Jehu, hopefully.

"No, nor husbands beant, nuther!" responded the maid, cruelly. "Di'mants or no di'mants, no man's tantrums fur me."

In the meantime Isolde, who had accepted the case from the maid without a protest, resolutely held it toward her husband, when they were again alone. For a moment he hesitated. Then, with a taunting smile he took it from her, drawing out his watch at the same time.

"Just in time for the Denver flyer," he said, as he turned away.

She saw him no more that night.

Bitter days ensued. As love failed her, Isolde turned for consolation to her art. As she resumed the writing which for a time she had utterly abandoned, her pen, as if impelled, transcribed the story of her heart. Completed, it was a long poem of sustained power, a noble story told in noble verse. Such a poem had been the dream of her girlhood, the conception of her earlier womanhood ; but only with maturity had come the pain and sorrow whose travail gave it birth. When the last word was written, she kissed the manuscript with rapturous lips. The intuition had come to her—the sure intuition of the creator, that the creation is good.

She relinquished her pen with a sigh ; half of regret, half of relief, and abandoned herself to the rapt unspeakable ecstasy which the artist alone knows. The fire of inspiration, though its work was consummated, had not yet flickered out ; and the spirit-flame cast over the material creation the transfiguring glow of the ideal conception, which not till calmer hours would she realize, had eluded birth. Its life was in her blood, its glow in her heart, its excitement in her brain. The poem flashed before her eyes in fitful phrase and fragment—echoed in her ears now in sonorous periods swelling like organ-harmonies, now in dainty fancies, lilting like fairy-songs. In unconscious, ecstatic murmuring, her lips reiterated her spirit's music. Her arm, where it pressed her eyes, was wet with rapturous tears. A subtle tremor thrilled her from head to foot.

Her husband, surprising her in her blissful reverie, scrutinized her rapt face with curious eyes that followed her as she shut her manuscript in her desk. He had remarked her unwonted abstraction and absorption of late,

and was not loath to possess himself of the secret of it. At the moment, as fate would have it, the announcement of a visitor called her from the room. As the door shut behind her, he stepped to her desk, and after an instant's hesitation, raised its lid and took out the written pages. Then he lighted a cigar, and by the glow of the open fire, began to read. For an hour he read on intently. Then he tossed the stump of his cigar into the flames.

“The devil !” he ejaculated.

Flinging the manuscript back to the desk he paced the little room, his hands folded behind him, his brow furrowed with deep and gloomy thought. Now and again he smiled bitterly. Once with impatient hand he dashed a sudden moisture from his eyes. As Isolde returned, he pointed to the desk in silence. She started violently as the disordered sheets caught her eyes.

“Yes, I have been reading it,” he admitted, “and a lucky thing, too, by Jingo ! Is it possible that you intend to publish it ? You are mad ! Do you realize that you have analyzed yourself, me, the whole spiritual and emotional history of our marriage, as minutely as the surgeon dissects a naked body ? If you enjoy the scalpel, I do not. As a matter of common decency your dissection of me, at least, should have been with a reserve.”

Without a word, she gathered up the pages, and turned with them toward the door. He mistook her dazed silence for defiance.

“Have you understood me ?” he asked, interposing as she was about to leave the room.

She did not answer. She had not heeded, scarcely heard him. His anger, which had been slowly kindling, flashed into sudden flame.

“Possibly you will understand this,” he cried, wrench-

ing the manuscript from her hand ; "and this," tearing it leaf by leaf ; "and this!" showering the fragments into the glowing grate. "Let this end the damned nonsense, for good and all. As for me, I am sick of it."

He went out, slamming the door behind him. She stood where he had left her, staring blankly into the open fire.

A mother looks upon the face of her dead child, and smiles ; the child lives still, in heaven. A lover kisses his dead love, and whispers between his sobs that love is deathless, eternal. The artist turns from his shattered work, and knows that the past was vain, that the future is hopeless ; that the child of his soul, the love of his heart, the dream of his brain, the creation of his hand, is dead, dead forever !

Under the glowing logs, in a pall of pathetic ashes, lay the shattered vase which had brimmed with her life-blood. She put her hand to her breast. It felt chill, numb, empty. Without stint, without reserve, she had spilled its sweet life-store. She stretched her hand to the bright flames. Give her back, O give her back, all they had taken from her ! In vain the prayer. Not one small portion of her golden measure should be restored to her. Gone—to the last sweet tittle, gone forever !

She had sunk on her knees by the hearth, crouching lower and lower, until her forehead rested on the gilded fender. The burned sheets rustled in the grate ; the soft sound roused her. As she lifted her face, a scrap of paper fluttered to the hearth. In trembling hands she caught it up, and pressed a passionate kiss upon it. Then with eager eyes she scanned it. Upon its curled scorched surface a few lines still were legible. As she read them a cry of pain and incredulity escaped her. Re-reading

them, the dawn of anguished revelation paled upon her face.

* “Who loveth Love must break the bonds of Art!
Man chafes at loving a divided heart.
Art is a mistress with a sovereign will,
Man’s heart a master—and to quite fulfil
The stern demands of either is a strife
Extending e’en beyond one woman’s life.
Love brooks no rival; half-souled gifts derides,
And, scornful, shuns the shrine where Art abides.
Let woman choose the fleeting bubble Fame,
And bid good-by to cheeks with Love afame;
Or let her choose Love’s leaping lambent fires,
And put away Ambition’s wild desires.
No middle course is left; man’s heart demands
Complete surrender at a woman’s hands.” * J. C. H.

The twilight deepened to dusk. The spent flames flickered. Through the grate-bars a shower of chill gray ashes filtered to the hearth. She did not see them, though her blank gaze seemed to follow them. Her eyes were fixed upon the vision of her life’s mistake.

“Who loveth Love must break the bonds of Art!”

How and why had she written the fateful words—she, who had loved Love well, yet borne Art’s bonds unbroken? The prayer of her bridal-days, of her wife-heart, recurred to her. To be “a good wife—only to be a good wife,” had been its burden. Had that yearning prayer been born of her own unrecognized suspicion that her wifely surrender of heart and life was not entire and unreserved?

“Art is a mistress with a sovereign will,
Man’s heart a master—and to quite fulfil
The stern demands of either is a strife
Extending e’en beyond one woman’s life.”

Her own pen had written the too true words, yet in the field full narrow for single strife, she had waged the two-fold one, loyal to neither sovereign, since failing both. And the cost of her failure—

“Love brooks no rival ; half-souled gifts derides,
And, scornful, shuns the shrine where Art abides.”

Though Art should yield the shrine, Love must still scorn it. For her whole-souled gift, it was too late, too late! With bowed face she wept bitterly.

The mistake, the failure of her married life confronted her with accusing, vengeful face. Her husband had changed from good to bad, from bad to worse. She had believed this change her misfortune ; now she realized that it was, in part, her fault. Her life, which should have been the complement of his, had denied, eluded, resisted him. He had hungered for bread, and she—by his own lips convicted—had held him a stone. His thirsting soul had turned to her, and the draught which she alone could hold, whose fulness alone could satisfy him, she had poured in stinted measure which left him a-thirst still.

“Let woman choose the fleeting bubble Fame
And bid good-by to cheeks with Love aflame,
Or let her choose Love’s leaping lambent fires,
And put away Ambition’s wild desires,
No middle course is left—”

she had written, yet striven to pursue the middle course. She sprang to her feet, and turned to her desk. The hearth was littered with the ashes of her dead Art-dream. Impulsively, yet resolutely, beside these she emptied her desk’s entire store. Reams of manuscript,

prose and verse ; two small volumes of published song ; letters from press and public ; stories and poems in print and type ; columns of criticisms ; heaps of fugitive notices ; budgets of reviews ; souvenirs of pen-won friends from far and near ; her gold, pearl-handled pens ; her scented blotters ; all the dainty, luxurious trifles with which her art had been surrounded, she turned out together. Then she looked down upon her work. Her eyes were tearful, but her lips inexorable.

“ Man’s heart demands
Complete surrender at a woman’s hands,”

she murmured. “ O my love, my love, the surrender is complete, at last !. God grant it may not be too late ! ”

Then, filling and refilling her hands swiftly as she could empty them, she cast the whole precious hoard into the devouring fire.

“ Your Muse ? ” questioned Dr. Keene, that evening.

“ My Muse,” she said, “ has fled me on wings of fire. Bid her God-speed, Doctor. Her flight, if late, is eternal ! ”

“ You mean—— ? ” he queried.

“ I mean that you were right when you warned me that the laurels of fame are for man’s brow, the rose of love for the woman’s ; when you told me to make my life an altar to my womanhood, my Muse its holocaust.

“ Who loveth Love must break the bonds of Art !

“ And, O Doctor, Doctor ! not because I break the bonds, but because I break them too late—with them, ‘ for love of love,’ my heart is breaking ! ”

The doctor was too wise to quell her passionate sobs, but he lingered till they abated. Then he went sadly out.

"Poor little fledgling song-bird," he sighed. "So the eagle has not spared her."

At the gate he halted, looking back to the splendid house with misty eyes.

"She will be mute while her heart is breaking," he murmured, "but," with a triumphant smile flashing through his tears, "when her heart is broken, how she will sing, how she will sing!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PHANTOM GUEST.

As time went on, Isolde's dread lest her sacrifice be made too late, deepened to conviction. If Steele was conscious that she had chosen

“. . . Love's leaping lambent fires,
And put away Ambition's wild desires,”

he made no sign. Even as he had derided the half-souled gift of her divided heart, so he now rejected her whole-souled offering—her complete surrender made at such sore cost. His feverish pursuit of fortune by day, of pleasure by night, absorbed him. In the past he had been only defiant: now he was reckless. Newfield began to remark that the young banker was “going it,” feminine tongues speaking the words indulgently, however, until masculine ones reiterated them with a wistful cadence which betrayed the temptation of the owners thereof to “go it” with him. Whereat indulgent femininity grew suddenly rigid, and relentlessly nipped such masculine aspirations in their bud.

The snows were still white on the hills, the wind fierce through the tree-tops, when “th' big house gev a party.” In the columns of the local journal, the festivity was described as the grandest social event of the season. In reality it was not a social event at all, but a business affair, pure and simple, as Virginie Sharpe, spinster, knew.

"A motley assemblage!" she declaimed to her chance companion of the moment, her keen eyes making an intelligent survey of the crowded rooms. "'Motley' is the newspaper adjective, isn't it, for such incongruous collections of human specimens? Do sit down in this corner, while I tell you who's who, free of charge. You look like a performing lizard, wriggling about in that serpentine manner."

The addressed was a slender, lithe young man, arrayed in the conventional evening garb of polite society; the dresser a maiden of uncertain years, whose mission it was to teach the idea of youthful Newfield how to shoot. She was a tall, angular, aggressive specimen of femininity, with a plain, prematurely-faded face whose high wrinkled forehead was stiffly framed in unlovely store-crimps. Her most telling feature was her tongue, which, while turned upon himself, the newspaper man failed to admire. Later, however, he acknowledged it an invaluable acquaintance for one of his profession.

As Miss Sharpe had said, the social assemblage was indeed a motley one; not only Newfield proper, but its outlying mine, ranch, and farm districts, being represented. Rough-handed, high-booted miners, writhing in the misery of starched linen; clumsy young farmers, uncouthly clad in ready-made clothes purchased for the occasion; ruddy-faced cattle-men, gorgeous in satin-ties of resplendent hues, and with folded sombreros protruding from their pockets, circled about with their respective wives and sisters and sweethearts, side by side with the conventionally-attired partners of the Newfield belles.

The newspaper-man looked about him in amazement.

"Don't understand it, eh?" queried Miss Sharpe.
"Well, *I* do. Every native in the room is a Harriman

Bank depositor. What's the logical deduction? Give it up, eh? Take the head of the class, do. I give you the medal for stupidity. Bless your muddled brains, what other than that the Harriman Bank is the only sesame to the Harriman house? Now, the Harriman house means Denver folk, Omaha folk, Chicago folk, Eastern folk. It means the great moneyed magnates (pronounced magnets), of the coast; it means English ranchmen of title; it means railroad-kings, politicians, speculators of all classes; it means, in short, Society! Perhaps you think this primitive region does not care for the capital S? There's where you're out. Every *paterfamilias* within a hundred miles will be a Harriman depositor by this day month. The women will work that, the ambitious daughters and the matchmaking mas. And Steele Harriman knows it. Every fool here looks upon this flare-out as a reckless extravagance. I tell you it's a big investment."

The newspaper-man began to enjoy himself.

"Doesn't Mrs. Harriman look just lovely?" exclaimed Miss Sharpe, whose own costume consisted of a scant black silk, freckled in patches by dowdy knots of brown ribbon. "Those tan shoes do look so stylish. If they have such in Denver, 'remember me when them you see.' I wear sevens."

"Shall I make a foot-note of it?"

"A bank-note, if you like."

The newspaper-man evidently did not like. Miss Sharpe considerably changed the subject.

"That Sphinx of a woman in black velvet, helping to do the honors," she said, "is Althea Rounds, Mrs. Harriman's sister. She made the match—not but what Barkis was willin' enough, but Peggotty wasn't. She was the shyest, most skrinking little creature I ever saw. To

marry her was like tearing up a white rose by the roots, and that's what Althea Rounds and Steele Harriman did between them. And George Rounds knows it."

"George Rounds?"

"Althea's absent, always absent, husband. She caught him like a fish on a hook, but even she failed to land him. She's got the tarnationest nature ever woman had, and he keeps the length of the line between them. When he heard of Steele Harriman's attentions, however, he swooped up to the Ledge like a shark; but the Sphinx lied in the most bare-faced manner, swearing by Ananias and Sapphira that the report was false. When he found her out, there was a frightful scene; I had it from one of my dunces, whose first cousin's sweetheart has a brother married to a sister-in-law of Mrs. Rounds' hired girl. He hasn't been back since, and my opinion is that he's gone for good, this time. See her glare at me. I believe she has heard every word. She's the type of woman whose every hair is an ear-trumpet, and every eyelash a telescope. She'll hear more than that from me before I marry. There's Harriman *père*, pairing off the wall-flowers. Don't punish the pun."

The newspaper-man revived.

"I shall, next time," he said. "How does he like the bride?"

"O, he's devoted to her. But then, he'd be devoted to an alligator. He's the dearest old fool the Lord ever made, and He's seen fit to make a good many of the sex. Sits down in that feather-weight bank, and beams on 'my son Steele' till the snow melts off the sidewalk. The twin-brother, Jack, shot six years ago in a backwoods gambling h—— ahem! hole, was a wild fellow, but worth a dozen of this one. O, you like him, of course!—all greenhorns

do. But he doesn't wear. He's like a professional beauty, skin-deep and good for one season only."

"Who are those—er——"

"Gushing young things with *the* hair and complexions?

" 'Red an' yeller,
Ketch a feller,'

but they haven't caught one yet. They are known as the Miss Hunters—husband and hyphen understood. That 'divinely tall' woman in dull jet following is Mrs. Anna-bell Rorke, relict of our late mayor, and besieged by his would-be successors. Handsome eyes, and knows how to use them. 'Samivel, beware of the vidders.' Miss Bread-and-Butter beside her is her Yankee niece. Doesn't look as if she knew beans, does she? But as she comes from Boston, she's open to suspicion. We make a point of being polite to her, in case she is writing us up. In all probability she is writing us down, in consequence. Politic politeness is one of the things which even the blind see through."

"The little Yankee does not look blind to me," said the newspaper-man, scrutinizing the girl somewhat keenly.

"O no!" admitted Miss Sharpe, "she's only near-sighted. Sees as far and only as far as others choose she shall see. Sooner or later, of course, she will put on glasses, but they will be rose-colored. She's that sort of a simpleton."

"I like 'that sort of a simpleton.'"

"What man doesn't? The rose-color haloes him as the god, crowns him as the king, his own fancy paints him. Every man scorns to be only a man; he must be more—or less. A god, till the halo pales; a king, till the crown crumbles. After—a brute!"

"I say, Miss Sharpe," protested the attacked, "draw it mild, will you!"

"Mild as a lamb," she acquiesced. "Humanity demands it. I forgot that you were alone and unprotected."

There was a stir at the entrance. Miss Sharpe readjusted her spectacles.

"Enter the guy of the town," she announced, "Miss Caroline Linnett, in love with Peter Jones, a noodle rhymester who signs himself the 'Pike's Peak Poet.' Look at her dandelion-and-green get-up. Didn't think she had the taste to match her complexion. He's pouring forth like a cat on a fence. Listen as they pass."

"Such a poem as you gave us last evening!" Caroline was murmuring. "I was faint—faint with veneration!"

"My lute!" sobbed the poet, "trembling and vibrating under the touch of the master-hand! My receptive one, open to the poet's influence even as the—the—as the lips are for the ruddy wine—"

Caroline disapproved.

"I belong to the 'Young Ladies' Temperance Society,'" she said, reprovingly.

"Ah!" faltered the poet, somewhat disconcerted. Then, with sudden inspired fervor: "I do not."

"It has been said," he went on, "that my verses are 'like wine, effervescent, delirious, and suggestive of the empty bottle behind them.' The *Denver Satirist* said that. I thought it a very sweet compliment."

Mrs. Linnett, a faded, affected, beribboned and becrimped little woman, chaperoning the gushing Caroline from the rear, leaned forward, and tapped the poet-cheek with her fan.

"Sweets to the sweet!" she said, archly.

"O, ma!" simpered Caroline, in coy confusion.

"Here comes an engaged couple," resumed Miss Sharpe; "Jack Holbrook, who once fancied himself in love with Mrs. Harriman, and Hanna Agnew, whose vestal-wings have just fluttered from a convent nest. She reminds me of Camoen's Catarina, with her

"Sweetest eyes were ever seen!"

That handsome man with the twinkling blue eyes is Nevilles, the contractor, noted for his witty tongue and kind heart, as well as for his millions. He's poking fun now at that portly and placid dowager by his side, whom he calls the 'Mother of her Country;' she having done her patriotic duty, maternally, to the tune of the thirteen original States, since the matrimonial administration began. In the interests of Social Economy, her husband should pension her off. Such women belong on the retired list of the Kughts of Labor."

Here Miss Sharpe bowed to a bright-eyed man who carried his intellectual head with an air of distinction.

"His type?" questioned her companion, with interest.

"Newspaper-type! But it's not strange you don't recognize it. He's a capital where you're only an interrogation-point. I fear that he'll degenerate into a printers' devil, however. 'Follow your nose,' says the adage, and his nose is crooked!"

Rejoicing in the possession of a purely Grecian feature, the newspaper-man looked complacent.

"What is mine?" he asked.

"Flat!" responded Miss Sharpe. "Flat as a flounder."

The Grecian-featured subsided.

"Here comes the religious element," she continued, briskly; "the Romanist priest side by side with our minister Druce. I call that edifying. See those Hunter girls smirking Druceward. They might as well set their caps at the man in the moon. That distinguished looking man following is Governor Rushing, of Nebraska. If you haven't to write him up as president, yet, I'll lose my crimps!"

With the instinct of the turning worm, the newspaper-man started up. He had endured much, but to search for those unlovely hirsute appendages just as supper was announced, he felt to be beyond even a journalist's courtesy.

"I'll write him up as anything," he cried; "as the Russian Czar, if you like! I'll swear to it, Miss Sharpe, if you will only cling to the crimps till after supper."

"What," snapped Miss Sharpe, as she rose, "will a man never forget?"

"His prayers!" asserted the newspaper-man, piously.

"Seat! There's only one S in masculine, and that one stands not for soul, but stomach."

"Really, Miss Sharpe, your opinion of man is——"

"That the one good man is the woman! No, don't faint! No more before supper."

The Denver orchestra had been, up to the present moment, the crowning feature of the evening; but now, as Farmer Jenkins appropriately put it, "th' supper took th' cake!" There was a general exclamation of admiration as the dining-room portières were drawn back, and the guests ushered into the spacious room, decorated with holly and fir-trees, upon whose artificially frosted branches twinkled hundreds of tinted lights. The long tables fill-

ing the room were dazzling with costly silver and scintillating glass. The glossy green of the holly-leaves tangled with crimson berries presented an artistic contrast to the snow-white damask over which they trailed in graceful loops and lines. White-gloved waiters flitted to and fro, dispensing sparkling wines and dainty viands. The popping of corks sounded like staccato notes above the subdued strains of the unseen orchestra.

The festive sounds floated through the windows, out into the cold and darkness, down the path, beyond the gate, along the highway, to the spot where, under a clump of ice-coated pines, crouched Freshet Sal, her sullen eyes fixed fiercely upon the splendid house. Inside were warmth and light and mirth and feasting ! and she was shut outside—out in the bitter cold, the lonely darkness —she and the little child clasped to her mother-breast. The bitter contrast maddened her. She rose from her crouching posture, staggering heavily on her cramped, chilled limbs, and dragged herself to the gate. It was open, and she passed through it. The light streamed from the windows of the deserted drawing-room. As she pressed her face against the pane, gazing hungrily upon the beauty and luxury within, a burst of music floated to her, as to the Peri, wistful at the gates, the angel-strains from Paradise ! A fierce look flashed into her eyes. She turned from the window, and with a stealthy glance about her, darted to the door. It was ajar, but a servant was stationed inside it. She dashed it open and sped like a phantom past him into the room beyond.

The feast was at its height. Wines were flowing among the elder, mottoes snapping, and nuts cracking for philopenas among the younger guests. The room was ringing with jest and laughter. The orchestra whispered a

waltz-tune. As the host, amidst a tumult of applause, rose to propose a toast, a scuffle sounded in the hall, followed by the noisy protests of excited servants. Althea, whose seat commanded a view of the door, gave one quick glance toward it, and then with a warning call to Steele, which he did not hear, rose hurriedly, white to the lips, and stepped forward. One glance, however, showed her that she was too late. She turned back and swept down the room, making an imperative signal to Isolde as she passed her.

Isolde, surprised and alarmed at Althea's pallid face, made a hasty excuse, and followed her sister through the rear door, just as Freshet Sal, with Waif in her arms, appeared on the upper threshold.

Steele's glass was lifted for the toast. As all eyes looked past him his own followed their gaze over his shoulder to the figure hesitating in the doorway. The glass fell from his hand and shivered into atoms; the wine trickled in a bright stream over the floor. A breathless hush fell upon the room.

For a moment they faced each other, eyes defying eyes, man's and woman's. Then, slowly, miserably, the woman's fell. Not in fear, though in his eyes as they turned on Waif she read the threat which for four bitter years had kept her subservient to him. In her mad mood she no longer feared, she defied, him. Not while there was might in her mother-arms, not while there was warmth in her mother-heart, not while there was life in her mother-breast, should that threat be fulfilled. She quailed before him not in fear, but in despair. As he had turned toward her, she had seen not him alone, but likewise the splendid room with its superb appointments, its beautiful decorations, its tinted lights, its glittering

tables. From the shimmering silks, the flashing jewels of the women before her, her eyes reverted to her own uncouth attire. The scent of flowers was on the air, the sound of soft string-music. She thought of the dark, chill, lonely road, and of the rough pine-trunks against which she had crouched, with the wailing winds about her. They were her portion—these were his. What could she do against him? Without a word she turned, and disappeared as silently as she had come, vanishing like a wraith in the outer darkness.

The banker turned back to his guests. A crystal goblet stood by his plate. He seized it, and calling for brandy, filled the goblet half-way to its shining brim.

“Our Phantom Guest,” he said, and drained the toast at a draught.

But as he set down his empty glass an oath broke from him. He had drunk the toast, alone.

“I wish,” ruminated old John Harriman, breaking the constrained silence, “as that there poor crazy creetur’ d let th’ little gal stop fur a bit o’ cake.”

Isolde returned to her guests, in smiling unconsciousness of the little episode.

“Althea was taken suddenly faint,” she explained, “but she recovered directly. Strange, was it not—such a sudden seizure?”

“Althea,” remarked the newspaper-man in an aside to Miss Sharpe, “is evidently a woman of resources.”

“Ahem!” coughed feminine Newfield, behind its fan.

“Is this little episode to figure in your columns?” asked Miss Sharpe, accepting the journalist’s arm, as they rose from the table. “Because if it is, at the cost of a

year's salary, I bargain, here and now, for the entire edition."

He did not answer her lightly, but turned upon her an earnest, proud young face.

"The popular belief concerning us reporters, is," he said, "that we are heartless, conscienceless, honorless. I think that if you knew us more intimately, Miss Sharpe, you would find us, as a class, both men and gentlemen."

To which noblest of titles, Miss Sharpe, thereafter, acknowledged the reporter's right.

When the last guest had gone his way, old John Harriman rested loving hands on his son's broad shoulders.

"Good-night, my boy," he said. "It was beyutiful—beyutiful. Don't ye go worritin' 'Soldy, tellin' her o' that there poor crazy creetur', ez didn't put no one out a mite, not a mite. I wonder if—if she'd give up th' little gal? My old arms aches ter hold her. Some'ow, she 'minded me, wi' her blue eyes a-smilin' under her yaller hair, o' my own little lad, before he grow'd up, an' died. If she'd give up th' little gal, would ye let 'Soldy take her, fur my sake, Steele? I'd like ter see a little face in th' old rooms before I die—an' she 'minded me—o' my own little lad—before he grow'd up—an' died."

Althea watched the old man up the stairs, and then glided to Steele's side.

"Possibly," she sneered, "since your punishment has overtaken you, you may at last realize the enormity of your senseless folly in not fulfilling your promise to me, and ridding yourself forever of the woman before marrying Isolde. For her sake, for your own sake, why did you not keep your word?"

"Curse it!" he cried, "I did my best. She stayed

against her will, before my marriage. To stay against mine, after it, has been her revenge."

"Ah, and for how long, may I ask, is Isolde to be insulted by 'her revenge ?' To-morrow she must be told of this evening's scandalous episode. What shall you say to her ?"

"Nothing," he answered, surlily.

"But those women will tell her."

"Let them go to the devil."

"With all my heart ; but the devil himself cannot stop their tongues. The time is come when this matter must be faced. I tell you plainly that Isolde must not, shall not, be subjected to another such insult. Of course, I know that you told her a lie before your marriage. You must now tell her the truth."

"Not by a long shot."

"Then I will."

"You !" he sneered. " You tell her the truth ! Suppose you wait until you know it. Understand, once for all, that the scandal I have allowed you to believe, like the fine tale I told her, is a d——d lie !"

"A lie !" repeated Althea. " A lie ! In Heaven's name, then, what is the truth ?"

"What, indeed !" he jeered. " Put this in your bed, and lie on it, my lady—I *defy you to discover the truth !*"

CHAPTER XIX.

SWEET CHARITY.

A few days subsequent to the big house festivity was held the monthly meeting of the "Newfield Sewing and Social Club." The sewing was for the heathen, and consisted chiefly of finely hemstitched and embroidered handkerchiefs, and decorative tidies. The social appendix to the sewing-hour was one of refreshment for mind and body; a light collation seasoning a still lighter debate upon any subject of social interest suggested by the president, Mrs. Rorke, a cultured and brilliant woman of social tact and charm. Althea was, as usual, absent from the meeting. Sewing-societies were not among her social dissipations. Nor was Isolde a faithful or diligent member. As a needlewoman she did not shine, and her monthly check toward the fund of the society usually represented her. Occasionally, however, she appeared in time for the after-hour, rather enjoying feminine Newfield's social discussions.

The scene of the present meeting was the Kummins' farm, famous as the most royally hospitable house in Colorado. In fact, the Kummins' name was appropriately and gratefully parodied by their social debtors into the "Come-ins." The farm, the richest and most extensive of the neighborhood, was situated some miles out of town, and in consideration of the long ride preceding and fol-

lowing the meeting, the usual light collation was dispensed with, and the society invited, instead, to partake of a substantial repast; which invitation, needless to say, the society, to a woman, accepted. Mrs. Kummins' teas were justly famous, and as the afternoon waned, and the hostess' frequent excursions to the kitchen were succeeded by an influx of sundry appetizing odors, feminine Newfield waxed even more vivacious than usual. The talk, of course, turned upon the Harriman party, which conversational windfall bade fair to be a joy forever to that town of gossips.

"I will say," italicized Milly Hunter, stabbing her emery by way of emphasis, "that if I was Mrs. Harriman, there'd be no 'phantom guests' at my parties, husband or no husband!"

"No husband," echoed Cilly, mournfully.

"'If' you were Mrs. Harriman, Milly?" laughed Miss Sharpe, polishing her thimble. "'What an "if" is there, my countrywomen!'"

"Tut, tut, child!" protested Mrs. Hunter, smiling indulgently, nevertheless, at her dashing daughter. "Young girls ain't expected to talk about sech things."

"Young girls!" sniffed Mrs. Holbrook, from a corner. "You an' me'd better be gittin' shy and bashful, Mis' Gibson. That there Milly's thirty, if she's a day!"

Mrs. Gibson, being a remarkably beautiful woman, could afford to be charitable to her less favored sisters. She shrugged her handsome shoulders, smiled with her handsome lips, and flashed an intelligent glance from her handsome eyes, in silence.

Mrs. Linnett, plying an aristocratic scent-bottle in preference to the plebeian needle, took up the conversational ball.

"For my part," she said, "I consider the affair a scandal. It makes me faint, ladies, faint, to realize that such an one is suffered in our midst!"

"Law me!" ejaculated Mrs. Holbrook; "and they do say that the way that Caroline carried on—"

Mrs. Rorke, passing at the moment, gently tapped her on the shoulder.

"If we listen to all 'they' say, my dear Mrs. Holbrook," she remonstrated, "we shall have no time left for our prayers."

Mrs. Tompson, an insignificant little woman, whose single talent was for housework, pursued the subject.

"Did you mind the supper?" she inquired, generally. "Not a thing on the table but was boughten. For a young housekeeper, Mis' Harriman is *the shif'lessest*!"

"I'll up an' own as I was shocked at the superflu'ty of wine on Mis' Harriman's table," volunteered Miss Prim, an ancient spinster. "A glass of sister Prude's good home-brewed, or bottled berry, now—or, on extra occasions, a sip of Californy grape, I say naught against; but when it comes to champagne runnin' like water, not to speak of stronger, as no Christian lady, not to say an unmarried one, could so much as name, *I draw the line.*"

"Wouldn't it be more exemplary to have drawn the lip?" asked Miss Sharpe, upon whom poor old Miss Prim's sly enjoyment of the Harriman champagne had not been wasted.

Miss Prim scorned to appropriate this address; and as no one was magnanimous enough to appropriate it for her, Miss Sharpe had the floor.

"I have sent Mrs. Harriman some tracts," announced Mrs. Prude, a tall, prim, stern woman, from whose side was suspended a small black ever-open bag of religious

pamphlets. “‘Death to the Drinker,’ ‘Rum and Romanism,’ ‘Bottled Blood,’ ‘The Corked Curse,’ and others. But as she is sowing, so she must reap ; and I fear her harvest is close at hand. They do say as Steele Harriman is beginning to drink like a fish.”

“Have you held a thanksgiving meeting over him?” queried Miss Sharpe. “To drink like a fish, assuming that fish do drink, is, of course, to drink only water. His conversion must be recent. When last I saw him, he drank brandy, like a man.”

Mrs. Prude turned purple.

“I hate old maids !” she retorted.

Mrs. Rorke tapped the presidential table with her jewelled thimble.

“Ladies, ladies !” she cried, “we are working for charity. Let the golden virtue that covers a multitude of sins extend to our tongues as well as our fingers.”

At this juncture, the Harriman sleigh dashed up to the door. Isolde’s face, against its background of dark velvet, looked pale and delicate.

“What a sweet face she has,” remarked bright-eyed Mrs. Yonge, with the cordial admiration of one pretty woman for another.

“‘Beauty,’ ” quoted Milly Hunter, disparagingly, “‘is but a disease——’ ”

“Which, as you and I prove conclusively, Milly,” interrupted Miss Sharpe, “is not contagious.”

Isolde entered the room, hand in hand with her cordial hostess.

“You’re jest in time for supper, dear,” Mrs. Kummins was assuring her ; “an’ you look as if a cup of hot tea wouldn’t hurt you. If you’ll walk right into the eatin’-room now, ladies, you’ll find the table ready.”

There was a brisk folding-up of unfinished articles, a putting of thimbles into pockets, a shaking of gowns, and blowing-off of threads, followed by a general uprising of the society.

"Go up-stairs and lie down on my bed, dear," the hostess whispered to Isolde. "You look sorter tuckered out, and can have a tray up there jest as well as not. Daughter Kitty'll be only too happy to wait on you."

She looked distressed as Isolde smilingly declined the kindly offer. An unfriendly element was rampant in the society, and she feared lest one malicious tongue or another should wound the young wife with a covert stab.

As the society seated itself, there was a flutter throughout it of pleasant anticipation. Even Mrs. Tompson's sour face attempted a smile, as her eyes swept greedily over the lavish table. A stew of canned oysters—inevitable prelude of Western feasts—steamed in white bowls at each plate. Great dishes set at intervals down the length of the table were piled with plump and tender chickens, fried to a turn, and covered with thick cream-sauce. Tureens smoking with a certain luscious rich dark mixture, known as "Mis' Kummins' gravy," waited for the farm-grown potatoes bursting snowily from their brown jackets. There were plates heaped with cream-biscuit light as foam between their amber crusts; pretty prints of freshly churned butter; round white cheeses, with pitchers of yellow cream beside them; pies, cakes, and preserves; apples and nuts, maple sugar, and popcorn; and jugs of foaming cider flanking the coffee and tea-pots on either side.

"Sister Kummins," exclaimed Mrs. Prude, "you do beat all! I often say if Newfield has one housekeeper

more 'n another to be jest sinful proud of, that one is Sister Kummins."

"O, now, if it comes to that, Mis' Prude," returned Mrs. Kummins, politely, "I surmise as some folks whose names won't be mentioned is second to none!"

"Well," admitted Mrs. Prude, modestly, "I won't say as I don't do my best, according to my lights. But as for such biscuits as these, or such gravy—I up and own as I'm beat. Your worst enemy can't but do you the justice to admit, Sister Kummins, as you're a good cook."

"Are you a good cook, Miss Hunter?" asked Isolde, laughingly acknowledging her own deficiencies.

"We flatter ourselves, Cilly and I, that we do exceedingly well, for our ages," admitted Milly, ingenuously.

"For *our* ages," accented Cilly.

Miss Sharpe, overhearing, could not resist a retort.

"Do let us shake hands," she cried, vivaciously. "That is my case, precisely. I do very well for my age. When we were younger we were, of course, more ambitious to excel."

Mrs. Rorke signalled for silence.

"Ladies," she said, "the subject of our discussion to-day is a social one. It is, 'Society, and its Requirements.'"

"Law me!" ejaculated Mrs. Holbrook, "where's the dictionary?"

"Sew-ciety's quite an appropriate subject for the occasion," giggled Milly Hunter.

"I thought it was Show-ciety," ventured Cilly, for once deserting her sister's words in favor of her idea.

"It's not Slow-ciety, anyway, where you two are," muttered Miss Sharpe, in audible soliloquy.

Sister Prim took advantage of Miss Sharpe's inattention, and refilled her glass with cider.

"The fatal fault of American society, I think," remarked Mrs. Drumond, the pretty and clever wife of the college-president, "is, that 'social selection' is its motto, rather than 'social equality.' It demands too much."

"And I think that it demands too little," differed Isolde. "Cultured, gifted, beautiful humanity is the highest humanity, and it yearns the highest to satisfy it. Neither chance of birth, nor accident of name; wealth, nor display, fitful fashion nor conventional etiquette, can satisfy with their material husks the humanity elevated through the refined flesh to a spiritual altitude whose requirements are

"The highest and most human, too."

"And these 'high and human' requirements are what, Mrs. Harriman?" asked Miss Sharpe, interested.

"They are, as I see them," replied Isolde, with timid earnestness, "the soul for which only God is high enough, and the heart for which the lowest man is not too low. They are truth and honor, faith and charity, strength and purity; magnanimity, sacrifice, love. They are reverence, sympathy, brotherhood. They are high thoughts, tender words, noble ambitions, heroic deeds. They are all the Divine that is in the human, and all the human that does not sully the Divine."

"But, Mrs. Harriman," objected Mrs. Linnett, with unpleasant significance, "surely you must realize that such requirements as you suggest would utterly demolish society."

"God forbid!" remonstrated Isolde. "I hold a firm

conviction, Mrs. Linnett, that men and women are much better than the man and woman think them."

"Possibly if your social charity were less quixotic," retorted Mrs. Linnett, impulsively, "there would be less barefaced imposition upon it,—‘a consummation devoutly to be wished’ if ‘honor and purity’ be indeed requirements of good society, as you say."

"O Ma!" gasped Caroline.

The gauntlet had been thrown. In the ensuing hush, all eyes were turned upon Isolde. For an instant she looked bewildered. Then, alternately flushing and paling, she spoke.

"I do not quite understand," she said. "Will you be kind enough to explain your significant words, Mrs. Linnett?"

"O, no particular significance was intended," fluttered Mrs. Linnett, intimidated by Caroline's hysterical reproaches, and already regretting her rash attack.

Mrs. Prude disapproved.

"Sister Linnett," she said, "let them as the cap fits, put it on."

Isolde rose.

"I insist," she said, "that you speak clearly."

"Haven't they told you?" demanded Mrs. Prude, breathlessly.

"Nothing has been told me—nothing! What is there to tell?"

There was a general murmur of consternation.

"They're a fine pair—Althea Rounds and Steele Harriman," muttered Mrs. Prude, under her breath.

Mrs. Rorke left her seat, and stepped to Isolde's side.

"This is a great tempest in a very small teapot, Mrs.

Harriman," she said, "and it is a disgrace, a scandal, that you should be insulted by it. The simple fact is, that while you were absent from the supper-room, on the night of your charming entertainment—and for the pleasure you so kindly gave us you are indeed most gratefully repaid!—that poor crazed creature called 'Freshet Sal,' attracted by the music and lights, made her way into the house, and surprised us by her appearance in the room. We had scarcely discovered her when she disappeared, and that is the whole story. I beg leave to add, however, that as president of this most charitable society, I resign. Its charity is a mockery. Therefore the excuse for the existence of the society is at an end."

Her resignation was not accepted without many protests. Mrs. Rorke was a woman eminently fitted for social leadership, and under her tactful rule the society had seen its halcyon days. Reproachful glances were darted at Mrs. Linnett, who began a nervous apology, interrupted, however, by Isolde's resolute voice.

"You say," she said, "that the woman Sal is crazy. Thank you for your kindly championship, dear Mrs. Rorke—but you mistake. Freshet Sal is as sane as you are, as I am!"

This statement was a surprise. What would she say next? The expectant society held its breath.

"It is late," she went on slowly, "to offer you an apology for the very unpleasant ordeal to which, as my guests, you were subjected. Nevertheless, I beg that you will accept it. You may feel that a full explanation is due you. I regret to say that I cannot offer you one. In doing so, a sacred trust reposed in me by my husband before our marriage, would be betrayed."

Mrs. Prude coughed significantly. Isolde turned upon her.

"There are many of you," she said, "who are devoted church-members, fruitful workers in the vineyard, loyal sheep of the Good Shepherd's fold. Of such, at least, I may ask in firm faith that I shall not be denied, charity—not for myself, but for those from whom Mrs. Linnett's words prove that it has been withdrawn."

There was no response. The prevailing sentiment was that charity had been stretched to its uttermost limit, in favor of Steele Harriman. Isolde realized that her appeal had been in vain. They were doubting Thomases, who must see, to believe. Impulsively, she raised her hand toward heaven.

"I swear to you," she said, "that your suspicions are unjust. The innocent is suffering nobly and generously, if quixotically, for the guilty. How could I endure it, were it as you think? Do you believe me?" she asked. "Do you trust me?"

A few kept silence. The greater number murmured a shamed affirmative. She inclined her head, gratefully.

"I thank you," she said; then with a word of apology, she left the room.

There were tears in her eyes as she took Mrs. Kummins' hand at the door.

"You can never pardon me for having spoiled your charming tea by such a scene," she said, "but you must have seen that it was forced upon me."

Warm-hearted Mrs. Kummins was weeping into the fluted edge of her company-apron.

"You're a blessed angel," she sobbed, lowering the apron to kiss her, "an' them tarnal women shall never

darken my doors again. Charity, indeed! No more sech charity at my table!"

When she returned to her guests, she listened eagerly for the general verdict.

"Some cock-an'-bull story that scamp of a Steele Harriman made up for that little fool to swallow for gospel-truth," Mrs. Prude was saying.

"She is actually goose enough to believe in—her husband!" laughed Milly Hunter.

"Her husband," acknowledged Cilly, with envious emphasis.

"I'll never be invited to another Harriman party," sobbed Caroline Linnett, hysterically.

Mrs. Linnett, in repentant tears and silence, timidly proffered her salts.

An hour later, when the last guest had taken her departure, and the dishes had been piled up for washing, Mrs. Kummins went to the society basket and emptied its contents upon the table.

"Thirty women, and an afternoon's sewing," she said. "Result, two highfalutin aprons, seven crazy-quilt patches, ten half-hemmed handkerchiefs, three bibs, and a half-dozen folderol tidies."

"The heathen will appreciate the tidies," remarked Kitty.

"Fifteen chickens, ninety biscuit, sixteen quarts of cream, and everything else in proportion," reckoned Mrs. Kummins, junior—a pretty, dark-eyed bride. "Mother Kummins, charity don't pay."

Gentle Mrs. Kummins, for once exasperated, pushed aside the astonished kitchen-maid, and vigorously attacked the dishes.

"Charity!" she exclaimed. "Full stomachs an' wag-

gin' tongues an' bleedin' hearts—that's what comes of charity ! I vum an' swanny, Elizabeth Jones Kummins, as they've had their last charity-supper in this here house ! ”

“Amen ! ” sighed tired Elizabeth.

“Till next time, Ma ! ” laughed Kitty.

CHAPTER XX.

AT BENEDICTION.

Isolde's mind was in a whirl during the long homeward ride. Had she done well or ill—said too much or too little? Would Steele be enraged with her, or would he realize the necessity of the action she had taken? She felt a nervous dread of meeting him, born not of fear, but of a premonition that more than the mere question of his approval or disapproval of her words was at stake. Now that it was too late she realized the mistake she had made in not insisting before her marriage that the secret whispered to her under the moonlit pines on the night of the dance in Jenkins' barn, should be made public. In her innocence and inexperience she had not foreseen the suspicion to which the scene of that night must give birth in the minds, if not upon the lips, of all who had witnessed it. Her own wifely dignity, her husband's honor, she now realized were the bitter cost of her mistake. She had hoped to reach her room unnoticed, but Steele, from the library ringing with men's voices, caught the sound of the sleigh-bells and hastened to the door to meet her.

“Where the deuce have you been?” he asked. “Rundell has been here, and has taken your absence none too pleasantly. Thinks you are turning the cold shoulder on him, or some such bosh. Kingsley and Randal are here for the night. Get into a decent rig and come down at

once. I can't afford to offend the crowd, bear that in mind, wise little woman."

Her voice was low, but resolute, as she answered.

"I have seen your friends for the last time," she said. "I have slept my last night under your roof, unless you promise me, swear to me, at once to make public the true story of 'Freshet Sal !'"

With an oath strangled behind his clenched teeth, he drew her into the empty drawing-room, under the blaze of the great chandelier.

"What do you mean?" he asked, scanning her face with defiant eyes.

"I attended a society-meeting held at the Kummins' farm this afternoon, and was insulted there—publicly taken to task for the scandal given by the mysterious relationship existing between you and the woman Sal. A reply was necessary. I did not betray your trust, but I confessed that you had reposed one in me. I swore that their suspicion was false; that you, the innocent, were nobly suffering for the guilty. And you have been noble, Steele, though mistaken. The nobility is yours alone, while I share your mistake. In my girlish innocence and folly I encouraged you in the quixotic course which has brought us to this shame. You cannot reproach me more bitterly than I reproach myself. But our mistake is not irredeemable. I have avowed your innocence—you have only to corroborate me by publishing the truth."

"I refuse!" he said.

"Steele!" she implored, "for your own sake, for my sake, for our child's—"

"I refuse!" he repeated. "But you—you, I suppose, will betray me. What a fool I was, to trust a woman."

To escape her scornful eyes, he took a turn up the room, but her scornful voice followed him.

"I will not betray you," she said. "Not women, but men, are the betrayers. I shall only—appeal to the woman."

As he wheeled about, a blast of cold air struck him. The parted portières were still stirring. Past them, swiftly, noiselessly, Isolde had sped.

He dashed to the hall-door ajar and swinging in the draught, and flung it open.

"Come back!" he called authoritatively. "Come back!"

The echo of his words answered him; their echo only.

From the direction of the library came the sound of approaching footsteps. He slammed the outer door just as his guests, the worse for his hospitality, joined him.

"I say, old boy, thought you'd eloped with the funds!" laughed Kingsley.

"Or w-with the fair," stuttered Randal, with an amatory leer.

"I was taking a look at the night," he said, leading the way back to the library. "Its deucedly cold. A stiff pick-me-up will be in season. I say, boys, we haven't had a spree in a month of Sundays. Suppose we make a night of it?"

"L-let's make it a w-week," suggested Randal, whose potations had gone to his head.

He seated them at a card-table, plied them with fresh liquors and cigars, and then, with a muttered excuse, left them. A moment later, having given a hasty order for the sleigh to follow him, he was striding through the darkness toward the Freshet Cabin.

Over the scene brooded the luminous darkness peculiar

to the rare-aired winter night. There was only a suggestion of moonlight, but myriad stars frescoed in gold relief the high blue dome of heaven. The air was chill and sharp ; the boughs of the leafless cottonwoods creaked frostily in the wind. A light fall of snow was frozen underfoot. From the Freshet sounded the roar of swollen waters breaking against their shores of jagged ice. For one breathless moment he halted, listening intently. Had he heard a sudden splash in the distance —a woman's cry, strangled by the death-cold waters ? What if, crazed by her trouble as trouble had been known to craze women in her emotional condition—already she was sleeping beneath that death-cold tide ?

Isolde, meanwhile, heedless of cold and weakness, was pressing on at a reckless pace toward Freshet Sal's cabin. Suddenly a deathly chill and faintness surged over her ; her breast was racked with every panting breath. As she paused and looked about her dizzily, a light shone out from a little church on her right, beckoning to her like a friendly hand. She staggered toward it blindly ; her hands, as they grasped the porch-posts, were weak and nerveless. Their hold relaxed, and she sunk prostrate upon the frosty steps.

An instant of surrender, then she forced open the white lids fluttering heavily over her sightless eyes. If she were dying, she could not, would not die without one prayer. Dying ? A sharp pang stabbed her heart. Of a sudden, life, even with all its pain and problems, was sweet. Die, and never know the fold of baby-arms about her ; never feel the flutter of baby-hands, the warmth of baby-lips upon her breast ? She would not die, she would not. She struggled to her feet with desperate resoluteness, and dragged herself into a sheltered corner of the empty church.

She was aroused from her swoon by the sound of solemn music, and by a pungent, spicy, sweet, pervading scent. The church was all alight, and its body filled with kneeling worshippers. Before the altar knelt the vestmented priest, surrounded by white-robed acolytes, veiled in the incense-smoke. Aloft, just above the gilt-doored Tabernacle, surrounded by tiers of shimmering waxen lights, a golden star was shining. The lights struck its chased rays, and radiated from them ; within it, exposed for adoration, shone the White Lamb of the Bloodless Sacrifice—the Sacred Host.

The choir was singing the beautiful *Tantum Ergo*. The celebrant's head was bowed in worship. The censers swayed on. From the kneeling congregation sounded fitful murmurs of articulate prayer. The altar-lights flickered across the rail, glancing like a passing blessing, here on a rapt, uplifted face ; there on a prostrate form and lowered head. From her shadowed corner, hidden under the projection of the organ-loft, Isolde looked. The scene was no new one to her ; such an one had been a familiar feature of her girlhood's peaceful, happy convent-days. The altar-bell tinkled. The golden star with its white Host-heart was lifted in Divine benediction. She sunk on her knees, her face bowed in her hands. The crowd passed out. The lights were one by one extinguished. At last, the one red lamp of perpetual vigil burned alone. On the porch of the darkened church she hesitated. To the Freshet cabin, or back to the home from which, on passionate impulse, she had fled ? Toward the cabin she turned, at last, as one impelled ; but calmly. The peace of Christ's benediction was in her heart.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STAIN OF THE MIRE.

The church stood midway between the Ledge and Freshet crossroads. Steele strode past it with no suspicion that his wife was within. The uncurtained window of the cabin showed him a background of ruddy firelight, against which Waif was outlined, straining from Sal's arms as she held transparent hands to the bright pine-sparks snapping fitfully toward her. He flung open the door without knocking. As it shut behind him he leaned against it almost weakly. Isolde was not here. Where was she?

"Put down the child," he said, as Sal turned to him. "I have serious news for you."

"'Ant to pway my pwayer," wailed Waif, thinking to gain a moment of grace from threatened bed-time.

Without a word Sal drew a chair toward the fire, and fastened her in it. Short as the interval was, it afforded the man an opportunity to concentrate his scattered thoughts. He realized, of a sudden, that Isolde's absence gave him an advantage which might prove his salvation. If he could but induce Sal to leave Newfield before Isolde could see her, his secret would still be safe.

"My wife is not here?" he asked, looking suspiciously into the shadowy inner room.

Intense surprise flashed into Sal's face, but she answered only by a sullen shake of her head.

"She has not been here?"

"No."

"But she will be, and the meeting will not be a pleasant one for you, Sal. I am come to save you from it. She has discovered—the truth."

The words were a lie, but the woman did not know it. She started, uttered an involuntary exclamation of fear and defiance, and sped between him and Waif. He took a quick step toward her, speaking in a low but impassioned voice.

"The truth," he said. "You know the penalty, Sal. But I give you one chance to escape it—go, this hour, this moment! You shall have money—competence, riches. You shall have anything, everything your heart desires. Only go—go! Jim will stop the night-train at your signal, and take you with him into a new world where you two can marry, and be rich and happy. Delay, and you will lose your chance. Here is money enough to see you through the journey, and the rest shall follow. I swear it. Off with you, my girl! You are free, free forever, from the Harriman yoke of shame!"

He had uttered the words with feverish eagerness, pressing a roll of bills between her locked hands, as he spoke. She lifted her face; it was set and sullen. With deliberate hand she dropped the money into the nether flames.

He sprang forward, but he was too late to rescue it. Already the crisp bills were uncurling in the fiery draught, writhing as the flames caught them, withering into ashes.

"Curse you!" he cried, fiercely. "What do you mean?"

"Fur four long years," she answered, "I pray'd yo' day an' night fur to let me go. But yo' left me naught 'twixt bidin' wi' Waif or goin' wi'out her, an' th' choosin' I made, I'll bide by. Waif's not getten many things ter love, nor long ter love 'em, an' th' Freshet's her friend, an' I ain't a-goin' ter part her fro' it. When Waif's gone, I'll go, an' welcome; but not afore then, not fur nuthin'! You're too late!"

"Then bear the consequences of your refusal," he cried. "My threat shall be no empty one this time, by the devil——"

But the oath died on his lips. Between him and the child he was about to snatch from her shielding arms, Isolde sped, like a vision.

As he fell back, Sal sunk upon her knees at Isolde's feet.

"Yo're a woman!" she sobbed. "Some day, yo'll be a mother. Ez yo' do by us, your child 'll be done by. Waif can't last long. Life's done hard enough by her. Let her die easy, I ax yo' in God's name! She's lived 'yer by th' Freshet, an' she'll die easy by it. She's allers watchin' an' waitin' fur th' boat ez 'll come ter fetch her, an' th' tide ez 'll sail her safe ter th' golden shore. I've laid out how I'll loose th' old boat by th' cross-roads, an' drift along th' Freshet, while she dies in my arms. 'Tain't much I ax, arter th' hard wrong done me, but he's ag'inst me. Stand by me, fur Waif's sake! "Twon't be fur long. I oughter be glad o' it. Heav'n's th' place fur wimmen-folks. This yer's a men-folks' world!"

Isolde had come to appeal to Sal. Instead, Sal had appealed to her. Steele awaited the result, breathlessly. If Isolde's heart were touched, his secret was still safe. Had Sal failed, or succeeded? One look at Isolde's face

answered him. It was deathly pale, yet luminous with the sacrificial fires flaming from the altar of her soul. He thrilled with the exultation of triumph. His "devil's luck" had not failed him. On the verge of direst failure, he had won.

As Sal rose, Isolde answered her.

"Such mercy as you ask of me," she said, "I came to ask of you, Sal, but God has judged between us. I dare not set aside what seems to be His hand. I promise all you ask. I will guard your secret. Waif shall not be taken from you. She has lived by the Freshet—she shall die by it! At best, your cross is sorely, bitterly heavy. I will not make it heavier, to lighten mine!"

"Pitty 'ady," cooed Waif, burying her little hands in Isolde's soft seal coat, and stroking the rich fur with childish murmurs of delight.

Outside the cabin, sleigh-bells jingled. Steele stepped toward the door. As Isolde turned to follow him, Sal's prostrate figure barred her way. In her passionate gratitude she was kissing Isolde's feet.

Less than an hour later, her pathetic pallor enhanced by her dead black gown, Isolde entered the drawing-room in obedience to her husband's imperious summons. As Kingsley joined her, she saw, hesitating behind him, a blonde young man with a boyish, wine-flushed face.

"Randal!" presented Steele, informally.

As the youth stared into her face, retaining her hand in his unsteady clasp, a sudden shamed self-consciousness flashed into his bleared blue eyes.

"I—I'm not in trim to take your hand to-night," he said, "but I can't let it go. May I k—kiss it? You look like some one I once knew—one I l—loved and lost. She and my mother were all I had, and I l—lost both. If my

mother had lived, if—if she had—I—loved me, I should not be (hic) here to-night. I was a good enough young f—fellow in the—the—s—sweet by-and-by. I say, you're p—pretty as a picture. Only why the d—dickens don't you s—sit still? L—let's have another drink. W—what's yours? I—I didn't know how to d—drink in those days. I had not met R—(hic) Rundell, then, nor—nor—”

“Nor my husband,” finished Isolde, quietly. “I understand.”

There was an expression on her face that Steele caught, and partially understood. He knew that the boy had drunk more than was good for him, and thought that she was pained and annoyed.

“Come, Randy,” he said, slapping him on the back, and twirling him about as he struggled to regain his balance; “it's time for good little boys to be in bed. Ring for lights in the green room, Isolde. In the ‘green-room,’ by Jove! Pleasant quarters to lie low in for a few days, eh, young chap?—till the hounds lose scent of you!”

“The hounds in question being the original owners of the Red Ridge mine?” asked Isolde.

Kingsley started, and looked at her keenly. The boy nodded confusedly.

“Then sleep in peace,” she said. “If the hounds do scent you, they shall learn that not the boy who bought up the stock, but the man who paid for it, is their rightful prey.”

Steele stifled an oath. Kingsley, after an expressive exclamation, laughed indulgently.

“You're a plucky little woman,” he said. “I like you.”

She watched her husband till he had disappeared with his guest up the stairs. Then she turned to Kingsley.

"He is a child in your hands," she said. "I beg that you will spare him."

"I will," he answered, boldly, "if I may spare him for your sake."

Her shining eyes, whose sudden light he failed to read aright, led him on.

"You are divine!" he whispered.

Her silence emboldened him. As he leaned closer she repulsed him, with a gesture which was at once a command and an appeal.

"I am human," she moaned; "a human, young, weak woman, tired of a woman's life-long battle against man's ruthless odds. A madness born of anguish is upon me. The narrow way is weary; the wide way lures my feet. O, by your manhood, be for me, not against me! Save me from—myself!"

O, the pity of it! the pity of it! The white dove dragged in the mire, howsoever against its will, rises not thence, ah, never! with pure, unsullied wings.

As she left him he took a quick step after her, then with a dazed look, fell back.

"By Jove!" he murmured. "And I thought that I knew women!"

Through a woman Ralph Kingsley had fallen. Through a woman his regeneration was begun.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN TIGHTENING TOILS.

The crucial test to which Isolde had been subjected reacted physically, resulting in a severe illness to which she passively, even gratefully, succumbed. After her feverish emotion, the languor of weakness was welcome to her. She lay for weeks in utter exhaustion, passive and peaceful as a drowsy child. When she roused herself, at last, the snow had disappeared, and spring was bright on the prairie.

As Isolde convalesced, the gossip which had waxed and waned since the day of Mrs. Kummins' tea, waxed anew; expectant Newfield believing a solution of the scandalous mystery to be at hand. But as week succeeded week, and no explanation of her impulsive statement was attempted —when of the statement itself, indeed, both Isolde and her husband assumed blank and disconcerting unconsciousness—there was a general shrugging of shoulders, a confidential whisper that “Mrs. Harriman had found out Steele Harriman, for all his smartness,” and the scandal, the fact of its scandalousness having been satisfactorily established, eventually lost its interest. Isolde, however, was scarcely the happier for the truce, but she had now given up all hope of happiness. She had even given up its desire. Where she had once prayed to be happy, she now prayed only to be good. Since that mad moment

with Kingsley, when for the first time in her pure young life, temptation, born of pain and desperation, had faced her, she had realized that only in prayer was her strength, her salvation. Self is strong against others, but against self only God can defend.

For a little space after her recovery, her husband left her in peace—then the old miserable life was resumed. Delicate, physically, and with heart shrinking from the past and quailing before the future, she found herself compelled, night after night, to don the gorgeous gowns which she began to regard as the livery of a shameful slave-hood, and break bread with guests from whom her pure soul instinctively revolted. Night after night she found herself surrounded in the sumptuous drawing-room by such men as chose to sacrifice the wines and weeds, the racy after-dinner stories, and billiard and poker-tables, for her society. To her husband's pride, to her own bitter humiliation and regret, such men were neither few nor far between. As they flocked about her, flushed with wine and coarsely familiar in address, she felt a moral repulsion amounting to physical nausea, and turned to Kingsley for the protection her husband ruthlessly denied her. Since the night when her white soul had revealed its struggle to him, his previous familiar gallantry of manner had been substituted by an almost reverent respect, which fell like balm upon her wounded spirit. Too wise in his generation to assume any openly on-guard attitude in response to her unconscious appeal, Kingsley nevertheless saved her on more than one occasion from far worse evils than she knew. In her darkest hour she realized that the shadow might be darker. Had the men whom she found endurable only because they were men, been accompanied by such women as must

naturally have been their affinities — women of such type as the three from whom, months earlier, she had fled from her home into the bitter night — she felt that she must have revolted. But this insult, at least, was spared her; and more or less directly, to the influence of Ralph Kingsley, her merciful immunity was due.

There was one man from whom, however, despite all her courteous efforts to dissimulate, she openly and instinctively recoiled. This man was Rundell. He was a coarse, thick-set, sullen-browed man, with snake-like eyes whose pupils constantly expanded and contracted in a horribly fascinating manner. His coarse, black hair was oiled and scented; and diamonds flashed from his shirt-bosom and upon his short, thick fingers. He was Steele's inseparable companion, and one of the men who never failed to seek the drawing-room soon after the after-dinner claret.

One evening he had drunk more deeply than usual — as a rule he did not offend in this manner — and Isolde had fled his offensive presence in disgust. Later, he had some high words with his host. Steele excused himself, and followed Isolde to her room.

“ You have insulted Rundell,” he said, with ominous quiet. “ To-morrow you will make amends.”

“ I did not insult him,” she said, firmly. “ I simply made it impossible for him to insult me.”

“ Insult you ! ” he repeated. “ Did he really forget himself so far as that ? ”

“ Not absolutely in words,” she admitted; “ but his presence is in itself an insult — his manner, his very glance — ”

He laughed contemptuously.

"A woman's vanity and prejudice," he said. "There must be no more such folly. I—I—"

His eyes fell. His voice lost its imperiousness. There was an appealing note in it.

"Make allowance for him. Endure him, for my sake," he faltered. "He is a power. There is more at stake than you know."

Her face blanched. For a moment she stood in silence. When she spoke at last, it was in desperation, born of despair.

"You force me to say to you," she said, "what perhaps you will not forgive. But the truth is neither more nor less than the truth, for being spoken. Suppose that the application of your words should be reversed?—that there is more at stake than *you* know? You have forced me to play with fire, all my married life. It is a dangerous pastime. How can you know that I shall not be burned, at last?"

A terrible look flashed into his face, but it vanished even as it came. With a laugh, he stooped and kissed her.

"I do not fear for you," he said. "You are a woman with a God!" and hastened from the room.

On an impulse born of desperation she followed him. He heard the rustle of her gown behind him and quickened his steps. As she overtook him he drew aside the library portière, and dropped it between them. Turning back irresolutely, she found herself face to face with Kingsley. She grasped his hand, and drew him toward the hall. He yielded, looking anxiously at her meanwhile. She was very pale, and her hand, as it rested on his, was chill and trembling.

"I want you to tell me," she panted, "what this man

Rundell is, to my husband—why is he here—what his hold is—”

“Has he made you feel his hold?” he interrupted, wrathfully.

She waived the question, wringing her hands in nervous impatience.

“Tell me! tell me!” she implored.

“I cannot tell you just what his hold is,” he faltered. “That he has one, however, I fear I must admit.”

“Then you think—”

“I think it best that you should not offend him, unnecessarily—best for your husband’s sake!”

She turned away with a moan. Half-way up the stairs, she looked back. Kingsley was gazing after her with shadowed, miserable eyes, and at the end of the hall, the library portières just closing behind him, stood Rundell, smiling on them.

The next morning, Steele rode to the bank by the way of the Ledge. He had not responded to Isolde’s appeal, but neither had he been deaf to it. Althea, since her divorce, the secret of which had leaked out, had been circumspect, socially, and seldom presented herself at the Harriman house during guest-hours. Of late, however, Steele had noticed that Rundell had more than once found his way to the Ledge. He foresaw the way by which he could at once shield Isolde, and forward Althea’s ambition.

“Isolde is the right woman in the right place,” he confided to her, after a brief preliminary chat, “but she is not adaptable. She is impolitic, and intolerant of social means for business ends. You are clever and not too squeamish. You know what I want of you. She is the wheel to grind the grain, but your’s is the hand to turn it. Do you agree?”

Althea hesitated. In truth, she resented his plain speaking. It proved that he lacked the respect for her that he felt for Isolde. Moreover, she thought that he was somewhat reckless. Remarks were already rife in Newfield as to the "goings-on" at the Harriman house. Steele, who had not dismounted, watched her with half-shut eyes, flicking away the ashes from his cigar as he waited.

"I will make it worth your while," he added.

Still she made no answer.

"By the way," he said, as if changing the subject, "the house must be kept attractive to Rundell, and the present administration bores him. In his brutal way, he is an inveterate lady's man. The tastes of a man of millions must be considered. I must get down a few handsome girls from Denver, to amuse him."

Althea's blue eyes dilated.

"I agree," she said, curtly.

He rode away with a smile on his face. Isolde would be shielded.

Ignorant of her husband's little manœuvre in her behalf, Isolde, meanwhile, was passing a bad day. The scene of the previous night haunted her like the memory of an evil dream. She scarcely dared realize the real significance of it. That her husband had political ambitions at stake—that he speculated recklessly, even daringly, she knew; but that he could be in the power of Rundell or his kind, was a possibility fraught with shame she could not face. She thought and thought, till her heart fainted and her brain reeled. When her husband's step sounded on the threshold she sped to her dressing-room, where, at this hour, he usually sought her. Perhaps he would hear, would heed, a last appeal. The

day had gone well with him, and he joined her in happy humor.

"Not dressed yet?" he said, with a disparaging glance at her dainty *negligée*. "Make haste, little woman! Appetite, as well as dinner, waits!"

"Do we dine alone, Steele?"

"Heaven forbid; since upon Rundell's amiable mood this evening is staked the biggest stock 'combine' of the spring market. He and Kingsley drove up with me. A few of the boys will run down by special, for the evening. They can't keep away. Do you know what they say in Denver?—that I own the best wines, the best weeds, and the prettiest woman in Colorado!"

"You are willing that your wife should be classed by such men, with your wine and your cigars?"

"I am charmed that such men consider my wife worthy of the classification."

There was a knock at the door. The maid handed in an exquisite cluster of rare orchids. They bore Rundell's card.

She shut the door and turned to her husband. The moment for her appeal was come.

"Steele," she said, "I am going to appeal to you for the last time. If you repulse me now, I will never turn to you again, never, so help me God, however sore my need! You are dragging me down, unconsciously, unrealizingly, as you are allowing yourself to be dragged down by these bold, bad men. They are not your friends, Steele, but your most ruthless enemies; because they are ruining not only your body, but your soul. Are you better for their companionship by one pure thought, one high ambition, one noble word or deed? Not one! What are their words but oaths? What is their example but dissipation?"

What are their animal, brutal, sensual lives but insults to their God, evils to their fellow-men, degradation for themselves, contamination for you? The intimacy has been a mistake, a step aside. End it! Begin, by letting me send back these flowers. Let me send them back, Steele—let me send them back!"

He took the orchids from her hand, and buried his face in them. In breathless suspense she waited for his answer. As he restored the bouquet to her, his eyes did not meet hers.

"Sweets to the sweet," he said. "Rundell is nothing if not gallant. Have you remarked his devotion to Althea? Wear or carry these to-night. Their sweetness, like their fair recipient's, is far too precious to be wasted."

She dashed the blossoms to the ground, and trampled on them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SON AND HEIR.

In September Isolde's baby was born—a son. Steele was at the bank when the summons reached him. He obeyed it with haggard face and a heart racked with bitter, vain regret. The possibility of losing her tortured, almost maddened him. In spite of the misery to which he had ruthlessly subjected her, he loved her. Bad as he was, he would have been infinitely worse but for this love, whose purifying, ennobling influence kept alive the divine flame ever flickering within his soul. As he entered the hushed house, the sound of a faint cry reached him. He dashed into the library, and covered his ears with his hands. Without remorse he had subjected her to long and acute mental torture; but physical pain was different. He could comprehend, compassionate it, revolt against it. He drew a breath of relief that was almost a sob as Dr. Keene appeared, and ended his suspense.

"The danger is comparatively over," he said. "She is asking for you. Be careful not to excite her."

On the threshold of the darkened chamber he hesitated. He felt himself pushed in, and heard the door shut softly behind him. At first, the still, dark room with its drawn curtains seemed unfamiliar to him. Then he discerned a cloud of gold-brown hair on the pillow, and a sweet, wan face framed in it, lighted by fluttering violet

eyes. One white arm lay outside the coverlet, and upon it a tiny bundle of flannel seemed to stir. A great awe swept over him. How dared he enter this holy chamber—he, every unworthy phase of whose life flashed vengefully before him, like angel-swords of flame ! A sob broke from him, a terrible sob, strangled in its birth. He groped his way to the bed, and fell on his knees before it.

“My darling !” he cried. “My darling !”

“You wished for a son,” she quavered. “I am so glad, so glad ! Is he not the most beautiful darling ? Kiss him.”

The bundle of flannel proved to have one vulnerable spot. On the little red, distorted countenance, whose beauty was unrevealed, as yet, save to doting mother-eyes, the young father timidly rested his lips. As he did so, a tiny clenched fist, soft as down and weak as a fledgling-wing, wavered up against his cheek. He held his breath as it lingered there, caressing it with timid tenderness, as it fluttered down. The young mother’s eyes overflowed with happy tears.

“My baby’s father !” she whispered.

The tender words unmanned him.

“My wife,” he cried, “tell me, tell me that you forgive me !”

He hid his face as she answered him. Forgive him ? Ah, there was so much to be forgiven—so much more than she knew !

The unextinguished divine spark within him was fanned to sudden flame. By its light he saw himself, his life, as both had been, as both might and should have been, had this pure, sweet woman but had her gentle way. Intuitively, she read his thoughts. A shadow fell on her happy face. She began to tremble, nervously.

"The past has been all wrong and wicked," she murmured. "God will forgive us, help us, to begin anew. We will do better—we must do better, Steele, for baby's sake!"

He did not answer. He was shuddering in acute torture. The words were coals of fire burning his soul and heart. "God will forgive us—*us!*" she was saying—she, who had been as pure and spotless as the white-winged angels. "God will forgive *us!* We will do better!" O, the shame, the pain, the pity of it!

Of a sudden he realized that her breath was coming in quick gasps, and that her hand was burning. He looked at her anxiously. Her eyes were darker and brighter than when he had last looked in them, and a feverish flush was deepening on her cheeks. On the pillow her head tossed restlessly, to and fro, to and fro—

"I—I cannot think how it all came about," she panted; "all the wrong—and sin—and sorrow. The cabin—by the Freshet!—The child—and the woman!—Who are all these men around me—smiling at me—and staring—with dreadful eyes! Save me from them—Steele, Steele, save me—for—baby's—sake!"

In alarm, he called to the nurse, waiting in the little ante-room. One glance at the flushed face on the pillow, and she ordered him from the room, and summoned Dr. Keene. As he descended the stairs, Althea met him. She extended her hand, gaily.

"I congratulate you, Harriman senior!" she said.

In his torture of suspense and vain remorse, he brushed by her with a shudder.

"Don't touch me!" he cried. "Don't speak to me. I have been with—her!"

Althea gazed after him, blankly. Then, with a shrug of

her handsome shoulders, she passed on. The tale of the lost Paradise recurred to her. According to Adam, it is Eve, always Eve, who eats the apple!

Isolde did not die. Day by day, fettered to earth by clinging baby-hands, her hold on life grew stronger. Upon a changed world she looked out with changed eyes. What had seemed before, earthly, ignobly human, was now divine. The sweet old Christmas story was brought near to her. She understood now how the world had been redeemed by the birth of One little Child. The maternal passion was strong in her. She loved God, her husband, all the human world, infinitely the more, because of this one helpless atom of humanity, lying like a rosebud on her breast. With tender eyes and cheek pressed lovingly against the baby-face, she sat, day after day, dreaming—dreaming. Who shall read the heart of the mother-bird, brooding in rapture over the new-filled nest? Who tell the dream of the mother-breast, thrilling with love of its first sweet human birthling? She made tender little songs, and sung them between her dreams. Here is one of them:

LOVE'S SYNONYMS.

What is my sun?

A silken floss

That young winds tangle, and twine, and toss.

A floating halo that gilds the air,

And the floss—my sun—is your golden hair,

Your hair,

Baby boy!

What are my stars?

Sweet pansies two,

With hearts of purple, and rims of blue.

Love shines within them in stellar guise,
And my pansy-stars are your two bright eyes,
Your eyes,
Baby boy !

What is my rose ?
A love-cup shy ;
Sweet draughts of kisses within it lie.
It brims with laughter and love and youth,
And the cup—my rose—is your rose-red mouth,
Your mouth,
Baby boy !

What is my bird ?
An unseen lyre,
Whose sweet strains echo from angel-choir,
Its songs of heaven bid earth rejoice,
And the lyre—my bird—is your childish voice,
Your voice,
Baby boy !

What are my life,
My love, my bliss ?
Your gold young tresses, your eyes, your kiss !
In these my rapture ; elsewhere my rue,
For my whole, whole world is just you, sweet, you !—
Just you,
Baby boy !

And here, another.

SLUMBER-SONG.

Fair five petalled lilies two,
Budding white in heaven's blue,
Earthward peeping, once saw you,
(Sleep, baby mine !)
Hence in heaven could not stay,
Truant-lilies, stole away ;
They that are your hands to-day.
(Baby mine, sleep !)

Once from Eden, roses twain,
 Five wee rosebuds in their train,
 Wandered toward this world mundane,
 (Sleep, baby mine !)

Met you in some dim retreat,
 White rose fair, and pink rose sweet ;
 Bloomed into your two wee feet.
 (Baby mine, sleep !)

Once an angel at earth's gate,
 Unincarnate lay in wait,
 Seeking soul inviolate,
 (Sleep, baby mine !)

Seeking eyes of heaven's blue,
 Mouth like rosebud wet with dew,
 Seeking, finding all, in you !
 (Baby mine, sleep !)

"There is the look of an angel on her face," sighed Mrs. Kummins, turning with Miss Sharpe from the Harriman gate, after a congratulatory call. "That blessed baby 'll go back to the heaven it came from, an' take her along with it. We'd best make the most of her while she's left us, Virginny, for we won't keep her long."

Miss Sharpe disagreed.

"There is a look of a woman on her face," she emphasized ; "the look of a woman who has loved and suffered much, and who will live to love and suffer more."

At the cross-roads they met Steele, mounted on Ladybird. He cantered by them with a gay salute. Miss Sharpe looked after him.

"He is grandly handsome," she admitted, reluctantly. "There is something almost terrible about such animal strength and beauty. After all, the love of such a man must mean life or death."

“To him ?” questioned innocent Mrs. Kummins.

Miss Sharpe scorned the suggestion.

“To him—a man !” she jeered. “Nonsense, woman, of course not. I mean to her, to her !”

Brooding, bird-like, over her baby day after day, in sweet young-mother fashion—thinking over her past, and dreaming of her future—there was one half-forgotten scene, whose memory revived and haunted her—the scene of the bitter night when she had fled from her home, and Althea had forced her back, and Magdalen—the woman from whom she had shrunk, had stood her friend and shielded her.

“ You need not shrink from me ; my touch will not pollute you. I am on the brink, yes; but as yet, I have not crossed the chasm.”

She had forgotten the words in the troubled time succeeding them, but in these long weeks of blissful reverie, when all the natural world seemed fairer, and all the human world nearer and dearer, because of the baby cradled in her arms, she recalled them, bitterly reproaching herself for having been deaf so long to their pathos and appeal. Baby should atone for her, she resolved, tenderly ; never doubting the power of those helpless, childish hands.

As she convalesced, the subject of the baby’s christening was broached.

“What is to be his name ?” inquired Steele, tweaking one of the wee pink ears by way of caress.

“He shall be called after you, of course,” said Isolde.

“I prefer that he be called first, after a better man—my father. John Steele—how does that suit you ?”

"It is not very pretty. I was thinking of Steele Marmaduke, after you and my father."

"Save the Marmaduke for his brother, my sweet, and please me. As to his sponsors, let Kingsley and Dr. Keene be godfathers—"

"I should have liked George," interrupted Isolde, wistfully. "But under the circumstances he is, of course, impossible. As to his godmother—"

She hid a smile and blush in the golden down which, notwithstanding her Muse's flattering representations, was all that had as yet materialized of John Steele's hair.

"As to his godmother, baby and I have a surprise in store for you," she said. "I will tell you what it is, after I have been to Denver. We are so happy about it, so happy—baby and I!"

She took a flying trip to Denver, her errand connected with the christening, indeed ; but not as exclusively with purchases for the christening as Steele believed. In reality, she went in search of Magdalen. The search proved unavailing. All her clues were false ones. Her atonement was too late. Beautiful Magdalen had escaped her. She resigned the vain search with a sigh.

She had left Newfield on the forenoon flyer. When her search ended, the sun was sinking. On the western mountains the summit-snows were crimson, the purple mists flecked with rose and gold. It lacked an hour of train-time. She was faint and tired. She drove to the Windsor, and ordered some refreshment served in the room known as "Harriman's," it being reserved for the Newfield banker's use.

As she left the hotel, and was in the act of crossing the sidewalk to her carriage, there whirled round the Larimer street corner a showy equipage drawn by a span of

spirited bays, whose glittering harness jingled with gilded bells.

As the liveried footman leaped to the ground, a tall, beautiful blonde, magnificently gowned and jeweled, descended. Isolde, moved by a sudden impulse, turned and looked at her. Then, with an exclamation of surprised pleasure, she approached her with outstretched hand. The woman started, and drew back against the carriage.

“You?” she cried, under her breath. “You?”

A sudden burning blush stained her fair face.

“I cannot take your hand,” she said. “I told you once that my touch would not pollute you. I cannot say that—now. The brink is behind me. I have crossed the chasm. Your hand, above all others, I can never touch again.”

She swept past her into the hotel, even as she spoke the words. For a moment, Isolde hesitated. Then with pale sad face, she entered her carriage.

Steele was at the station to meet her. As they turned into the home-road, she burst into sudden tears.

“My surprise,” she sobbed, “is spoiled. You may choose baby’s godmother, after all. She can never be Magdalen, never! I was too late, too late!”

“Magdalen?” he echoed, incredulously. “Magdalen?”

He flushed suddenly, and as suddenly paled.

“Did you meet her?” he demanded. “Did she dare to speak to you? In heaven’s name, what did she say?”

“Nothing that she should have said,” sobbed Isolde. “Not that the world is hard, and women false, and men strong and cruel; not that she had stood my friend, who failed to stand hers; not that her sin is on my head, who selfishly, ungratefully, deserted her, whom I might have

saved. She said only—that she could never touch my hand again."

The drive was taken in silence. At the door Kingsley met them. Steele drew him aside, and spoke a few hasty words.

"Come in for a B. and S.," he finished. "I feel as weak as—as a woman."

Kingsley turned off abruptly, with a stern, resentful face.

"Nothing for me," he said, curtly. "And, by the way, why not be truthful in our similes, and say, as weak as—a man?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE REVEREND HUNGERFORD HARNEY.

“MY DEAR DIVINE: ‘The iniquity of the fathers shall be visited upon the children !’ Alas for me—the hapless victim of our dissenting ancestors ! You seem to be at anchor in Rome, but I still drift from port to port, to fall foul in each of some rock of doctrinal unbelief. Like John, I want to go into the wilderness, and pray. The New-World wilderness is Newfield. I knock ! With your Bishop’s permission, bid me enter in !

“HUNGERFORD.”

With this characteristic letter in his hand, the Catholic priest sat in the parochial study, absorbed in earnest thought. Finally, he took up his hat, and with the letter still in his hand, walked to the Freshet cabin.

“It means,” asked Sal, when he had read it to her, “ez he’ll be ‘yer—’yer in Newfield ?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Yo’ sent fur him ; yo’ told him !” she cried, passionately.

“Before God,” he said, “I did not. I read you this letter to show you that his visit is unsolicited. The confidence you reposed in me was surprised from you, through your ignorance of our kinship. It is sacred. I have not betrayed it; I shall not betray it. But should

my brother remain here for any length of time, it will be impossible to shield you from discovery. To be honest, I shall not try. I suspect, I hope, that discovery will be the very best thing that can befall you."

The reverend Hungerford arrived with the twilight, a fortnight later. He was an impulsive, nervous man, whose gold-rimmed eye-glasses waged perpetual warfare with their nasal support. In appearance he was fair and slightly florid ; and his forty years were carried as jauntily as his glasses. His ministerial profession was carried more jauntily than either. In fact, the reverend Hungerford frankly confessed that he had made a failure of it.

"Spiritually," he said, "I am a rolling stone, and am absolutely without the moss of faith. High Episcopalian and low Episcopalian, Baptist and Methodist, Presbyterian and Universalist—I have been each and all. Romanism and Nothingism are the alternatives left me. Pray for me, that the fitter may survive ! "

Newfield listened, took his half-jesting confession for whole earnest, and sympathized with soulful fervor. Mrs. Linnett's sympathy, in particular, knew no bounds.

"Creeds," she said, "are narrow ; and you, dear Mr. Hungerford, are broad ! Caroline and I, with other chosen spirits, have sadly felt the need of a more progressive creed than the reverend Druce professes. He is admirable, as far as he goes ; but he has his limits. In my opinion, a special Providence has sent you to Newfield. Do not abjure your mission ! "

"But, my dear madam," he began, twitching off his glasses in his eager expostulation.

"But me no buts," she quoted in playful interruption. "Caroline and I will not be refused ! "

"O Ma," simpered Caroline.

The nerves of the fair sex are proverbially sensitive. Its olfactory nerves are super-sensitive. They detect an odor of distinction about the clerical profession, even though the odor of sanctity utterly fails to supplement it. The reverend Hungerford found himself, thanks to feminine Newfield, a social lion. His pleasing appearance and happy address—above all, his immunity from any trammeling matrimonial tie, adapted him for the *rôle*. He did not accept it, but he submitted to it. His complaisance was an additional feature in his favor, contrasted, as it was, with Druce's social reserve. The sectarian hatchet was buried, and a rush in the lion's direction made by all the marriageable females in the town, spurred on by their solicitous friends and relatives. Moreover, the religious revolution conceived by Mrs. Linnett soon took tangible shape, in consequence of which the unorthodox element of Newfield was in a ferment. Mrs. Prude, pushing aside little Mrs. Linnett by sheer force, headed it. A broad creed! A new church! An unorthodox minister! The tide of Revised Testamentism and Improved-Gospelism which had swept over the great cities, emptied its last small ebb-wave into Newfield. Newfield mistook the ebb-wave for the tide itself, and became in its own eyes supremely important. Its progressive mind could not be confined to narrow creeds, its enlightenment scorned the fillet of superstition! A subscription was proposed, and resolved upon, as the first step toward the establishment of a new church, whose unorthodox pulpit the reverend Hungerford should be called upon to fill. In the meantime, he was feted, day and night. Mrs. Tompson gave him a dinner, upon which occasion not the dinner, but the fair Susanna, was thrown at him. Mrs. Linnett honored him with a "tea," at which Caroline, in her most

aesthetic gown and simpering mood, officiated. The Hunters ventured a "party," which presented Milly and Cilly in all the allurements of evening (un)dress; and even Mrs. Prude, in forlorn hope for poor old unclaimed sister Prim, baked a suggestively bridal-like cake, decanted her choicest berry-wine, opened the blinds of the dark, damp, and dismal "best-room," and stitched up a brand-new calico-shroud, very long about the toes and very short about the heels, for the "orphan-help;" who appropriately laid herself out therein, to the knell of a falling tray and the toll of smashed china, proving, in consequence, not only chief corpse, but likewise, through the necromancy of Mrs. Prude's avenging rod, chief mourner!

As the social fever waned, the religious fever waxed. The subscription for the new church boasted many names, if not, as yet, many dollars. To broach with due ceremony the subject of his election to the pulpit thereof, a committee was appointed to wait upon the reverend Hungerford, who received the ladies forming it in the little parlor of the parochial residence. Upon the parts of Mrs. Prude and Mrs. Tompson, particularly, there had been strong misgivings as to the orthodoxy of crossing the Romish threshold, but these the less bigoted majority over-ruled. Entering the parochial parlor under protest, as it were, Mrs. Prude showered tracts about her—spiritual disinfectants warranted to be specifics against Romish contagion. Mrs. Linnett shivered sensitively, explaining that the "possible proximity of holy water chilled her delicate spiritual organization." Mrs. Prude, however, as self-elected spokeswoman of the occasion, found it necessary to overcome her spiritual delicacy; so adjusting her spectacles, and fixing her eyes upon her notes fiercely as

if defying them to evade her, she arose with a preparatory ahem !

“ Ahem ! ” she repeated. “ Ahem ! ”

The committee cleared its throat in sympathy. Mrs. Prude extended her hand to the reverend Hungerford, with the gesture of an amateur tragedy-queen.

“ And palm to palm is holy palmer’s kiss ! ” she announced, in salutatory.

Sister Prim hid her virgin face. The Hunters tittered. Caroline Linnett sniffed her salts.

“ It’s Shakespeare,” asserted Mrs. Prude, resenting the general disapproval.

“ Shake what ? ” asked Mrs. Tompson, her domestic mind reverting to carpets.

“ Shakespeare, Mrs. Tompson,” explained Mrs. Linnett, with gracious superiority, “ was a man — ”

“ That’s why his mind run on kissin’,” snapped Mrs. Tompson.

“ His mind, like all great, high, beautiful minds,” defended Caroline, “ ran on poetry ! To quote a great poet — ”

“ Peter Jones,” interrupted Milly Hunter.

“ The Pike’s Peak Poet, if you please, Miss Hunter,” amended Caroline, relinquishing the quotation.

“ Really, ladies ! ” expostulated the minister.

Mrs. Prude rustled her notes.

“ This interruption is unseemly,” she said. “ I beg leave to proceed.”

She straightened her spectacles, held the notes off at arm’s length, and — proceeded.

“ Dear Brother in the Lord ! ” she said.

This Ciceronian period was worthy of acknowledgment. Mrs. Prude looked expectantly about her.

"Hear! Hear!" applauded Mrs. Linnett, tapping her vinaigrette on the table. Mrs. Prude resumed.

"By our Christian sisters," she began, truthfully as well as politely giving "*place aux dames*," the unorthodox movement being an exclusively feminine one—"by our Christian sisters and brothers, we, the undersigned—I mean, we the present, have been—ahem!—have been——"

"Choosed," suggested Mrs. Tompson, in like defiance of Prude and Murray.

"Have been *elected*," italicised Mrs. Prude, with a withering look Tompsonward, "to call upon you, in reference to—to——"

"A new church," prompted Mrs. Linnett.

Mrs. Prude scorned the suggestion.

"In reference to a religious movement at present on foot——"

"In hand," corrected Milly Hunter, holding up the subscription-list.

"At present on foot," repeated Mrs. Prude, "concerning——"

She had come to the end of her first page of notes; turning it, she gazed helplessly at the reverse-side hieroglyphics.

"Concerning——" she repeated, glaring defiantly about her.

After a moment the silence grew oppressive. There were sundry apologetic coughs, and the Hunters giggled. The Hungerford glasses went on and off with nervous rapidity. Sister Prim searched for her spectacles, found them; searched for her handkerchief, found it; polished the spectacles, adjusted them, and refolded and repocketed the handkerchief; then rising in desperation, she looked over Mrs. Prude's shoulder.

“Why, Sister Prude,” she exclaimed, “you’ve got ‘em tail-end up.”

Sister Prude rectified the mistake, and continued.

“Concerning the establishment of a new——”

“Church,” re-suggested Mrs. Linnett, undiscouraged.

“Edifice!—of a new edifice to the Lord, and to the pulpit of which, we are in—in——”

“Invited,” murmured Milly Hunter, her thoughts on a coming festivity.

“Inspired by the Spirit to call you! **YOU**,” she capitalized, in eloquent peroration—“**YOU**, the Reverend Mr. Hungerford Harney, dear brother in the Lord!”

With a complacent flutter of skirts and handkerchief, Mrs. Prude resumed her seat, her discarded notes falling like laurels about her. The reverend Hungerford considered the matter in silence. Finally with a sweep-off of his glasses with one nasal contortion, and a sweep-on of them with another, he spoke.

“Of course,” he said, “there are certain conditions to be imposed. What are they?”

The committee hesitated. Mrs. Prude, having taken the initiative, felt constrained to keep it.

“As for me,” she said, “I must beg that the doctrine of damnation be insisted upon.”

“Hum!” ejaculated the minister. “And you, Mrs. Linnett?”

“Dear Caroline and I,” murmured Mrs. Linnett, with heavenward eyes, “seek the gospel of universal salvation, the gospel that is all light, all sweetness, all tenderness, all—all——”

“Poetry and love, Ma,” suggested Caroline, with coy self-consciousness.

Mrs. Linnett accepted the suggestion.

"Yes, all poetry and love, dear minister ;" she said, "all poetry and love!"

Mrs. Tompson expostulated.

"I recommend," she said, quoting from an eloquent exhortation published in a recent number of a religious weekly, "I recommend that a tireless watch be kept on each and every member of the fold, lest a general laxity —er—um—ahem—lest a general laxity follow the decline of—the decline of—of individual vigility."

"Vigilance, Ma!" corrected Susanna, blushing furiously.

Mrs. Linnett tittered. Mrs. Tompson turned ireful.

"Lance, or dance, or pants, Miss," she retorted, with increasing vigor, "I didn't pay fur your schoolin' this twelve year, ter have you sass me, throwin' it in my face afore folks. You're a serpent's tail, Susanna Tompson."

"Tooth, Ma, tooth!" groaned Susanna.

"And your requirements, young ladies?" asked the minister of the Misses Hunter.

"We, Cilly and I," confessed Milly, "would suggest the introduction of semi-weekly sociables to attract—ahem! to save the young men of the fold from the girls—I mean the godlessness, outside it."

"From the girls outside it," corroborated Cilly, who had not noticed her sister's amendment.

The reverend Hungerford, who had grimaced off his glasses as he listened, now grimaced them on again.

"Ladies," he said, "the issue of this matter rests with yourselves."

There was a general murmur of gratification which he silenced abruptly.

"No," he said, "not yet. I have heard your conditions. Now hear mine!"

He paced nervously up and down the little room, halting successively before each member of the committee, as his respective remarks applied.

“First,” he said, standing before Mrs. Prude, “as to tracts. In their way they are good. In wise hands they are the possible instruments by which a heedless soul may be reminded of its Creator; but commonly, they are more prolific of harm than of good. Their indiscriminate distribution I shall not only disapprove, but forbid. Moreover, I shall oppose the social slavehood, denounce the slaveholders, and free the child-slaves, existing under the present local domestic system of orphan-help!”

He passed on to Mrs. Linnett.

“Secondly,” he said, “I shall reprove all unchristian social pretensions and assumptions—all silly airs and affectations and frivolities—all foolish enthusiasms, and brainless hero-worship, from the pulpit.”

“Caroline, my salts,” gasped Mrs. Linnett, hysterically. The ruthless Hungerford passed on to Mrs. Tompson.

“Thirdly,” he said, “the text of my first sermon shall be, ‘*And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?*’ Such as are blind to their own beams, I shall feel it my duty publicly to enlighten.”

His nose went up and his glasses came down. Twice he passed the Misses Hunter in silence. As he spoke, at last, there was a regretful, an almost tender cadence, in his lowered voice.

“Finally,” he said, “I shall endeavor to elevate, ennable, enrich the lives of such unmarried women of my congregation as are no longer in their earliest youth.” With a comprehensive glance he included the Misses Linnett and Tompson in his address. “I shall say to them that human

love is much, but Divine love most of all—that the Lord gives, or the Lord gives not, but that His Name is blessed still! I shall say to them, ‘be not foolish virgins, vainly striving to kindle the marriage-lamp He has not seen fit to kindle for you, but rather, wise virgins, swinging your single lives like vestal lamps, chastely, modestly, steadfastly, before the altar of the Lamb !’”

The committee departed in dreary silence, its frigid leave-takings bearing no resemblance to the effusive greetings of the previous hour. Mrs. Tompson, indeed, gave voice to her indignation while the reverend Hungerford was still bowing them from the door.

“ Well ! I never !” she ejaculated.

“ We have been insulted, grossly insulted !” cried Caroline Linnett.

“ For my part, ladies, I withdraw my subscription,” announced Mrs. Prude, undeterred by the unimportant consideration that she had subscribed nothing to withdraw. “ The Spirit has undeceived me. We have been mistaken in him.”

Mrs. Linnett sighed plaintively.

“ A rude awakening is the bitter fate of the dreaming soul,” she said. “ Caroline, my salts.”

“ He’s a mean, spying, impudent old hypocrite,” sobbed Cilly Hunter, for once assertive.

“ He is, Cilly,” corroborated Susanna, with responsive tears.

But it was left for Milly to cap the climax.

“ He is a Romanist in ambush,” she said ; “ a Jesuit in disguise. My answer is—declined without regret.”

The motion passed unanimously. And without regret the answer was alike given and received.

CHAPTER XXV.

“YOU SHALL BE RIGHTED.”

Some evenings later the reverend Hungerford was discussing this experience with Druce, who had not been unaware of the backsliding of his parishioners. The young minister had failed rapidly of late. His always delicate face was now wan and pallid, and his eyes, in spite of their feverish brightness, were languid. His hands, loosely folded on the desk before him, were thin and transparent.

“I tell you frankly,” said Hungerford, “that I do not envy you your pulpit. Those few women would make a Babel of Eden. They need a parson apiece to manage them. How do you do it, Druce?”

“I am sorry to say that I do not do it. I fail, utterly,” he replied, despondently.

His weary voice, his wan face, struck Hungerford painfully. He leaned across the little desk, and laid his hand on Druce’s shoulder.

“Out with it, my boy!” he said. “Something is weighing heavily on that heart of yours. Is it a question of orthodox profession *versus* unorthodox conviction—or only next Sunday’s sermon, or to-morrow’s Old Women’s meeting?”

“Neither one nor the other,” replied Druce, smiling faintly. “It is only that this is an anniversary for me, and I have been—thinking!”

The desk was littered with manuscript, under which a small daguerreotype case lay open, face upward. Druce drew it out, and handed it to Hungerford.

"A woman!" cried Hungerford. "Marriageable Newfield, I weep for thee!"

"Hush!" cried Druce, sharply. "That dream is over. Such an one can never touch me again."

His elbow was resting on the table; his frail hand supported his cheek. He spoke in a weary monotone, his eyes fixed on the pictured face.

"It was a childish attachment," he said, "and it grew with years. When I went to college, I took her kiss with me. When I entered the ministry, the portrait of my promised wife was on my heart. She was delicate and had been tenderly reared. I could not claim her, while luck went against me, as it did, for four long years. At the end of that time I was called to a pulpit a hundred miles from here. I sobbed like a girl over the letter that accepted me. It meant so much to me: a start in my Master's work—a home—her! I went to claim her, and found her—in the graveyard. She had died three days before. Five years since then—five long lonely years, that seem like fifty! With David, I am tempted to cry out, 'How long, O Lord, how long!'"

Hungerford's answer was a silent hand-clasp. Then he took his leave. Outside the house, however, he lingered before the curtained window upon which the shadow of the young minister's head was visible, drooping over his manuscript like a tired child's.

"Whom He loveth, He chasteneth," murmured Hungerford. His eyes were suddenly dim.

The parsonage was at one side of the town, the priest's house at the other. Main Street, with its shops and

saloons, stretched between. It had attained, of late, to the dignity of gas ; no ghastly electric glare, nor uncanny natural gas conflagration, but good old-fashioned gas, burning steadily in yellow jets at the street corners. As Hungerford turned one of these, his thoughts busy with the young minister and the simple story of his sad young life, he found himself face to face with a pedestrian who was hurrying in the opposite direction, and a sudden collision brought both to an abrupt halt. As he grimaced off his treacherous glasses, he was horrified to see that the victim of his onslaught was a woman.

“I beg your pardon,” he cried ; “I trust that I have not hurt you ? These wretched eyes of mine——”

He paused suddenly, with an exclamation of pleased surprise. As she had attempted to pass him, the gas-light overhead, shining fully upon her, had revealed a face strangely familiar to him, but which, for the moment, he failed to identify.

“My girl,” he said, “you are——you are——”

He looked at her intently. A sudden light flashed into his face.

“Let me see your hand, your left hand !” he said, quickly.

She extended it, defiantly. It was a handsome hand, large and strong, yet finely moulded. He took it in his hand and looked at it blankly. It was ringless.

“Five years ago, in Smith’s Settlement,” he said, “I saw a ring placed upon this hand. Where is it ?”

Her haughty, defiant silence did not baffle him. In her eyes he caught the shimmer of rising tears.

“My girl,” he said, “trouble and shame have come to you. Is that it ?”

"Yes," she said, snatching away her hand, "that's it! Aint yo' glad yo' know?"

"You shall be righted!" he cried, but she shook her head hopelessly, as she glided past him. Before he could follow her she had melted like a wraith into the night. With glasses on and with glasses off, he peered into the darkness, this way and that, but neither sight nor sound betrayed her.

His brother was not in the library when the excited minister burst in. The meek young curate, just leaving the library for his room, turned back in surprise.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

"Yes!" cried the reverend Hungerford with fire. "You can pray that the wicked be confounded and the righteous triumphant!"

He vanished as he spoke the words, darting toward the church where he knew his brother would be found at this hour. The curate gazed after him with an uncharitable suspicion, for which he afterward did penance, that the reverend Hungerford had been seduced by hospitable Newfield into taking the "glass too much."

Hungerford entered the church by the vestry-door which communicated with the house, and stepping from the vestry into the dark side-aisle, turned, after an instant's hesitation, into a pew. His first impulse had been to call his brother, and confide his story without delay, but something about the quiet church calmed and restrained him.

The church was dark, save for the perpetual flame of the altar-lamp; and deserted, but for the priest's still figure kneeling within the altar-rails. The starlight shimmered through the stained-glass windows, bathing in a transfiguring light the bare wood floor, the uncushioned pews, the plaster walls. It flickered over the white main

altar, glistened on the gilded door of the Tabernacle, and bathed the ivory-mounted crucifix in a sheen of light. Back of the altar was a crudely-painted panel representing the Guardian Angel, whose white wings, in the flickering star-light, seemed to wave and rustle as the wind swept through the churchyard trees. An image of the Blessed Virgin stood on one side-altar ; one of her spouse, St. Joseph, on the other. Toward both the star-light wavered, playing over the white statues in tremulous, tinted rays. The only sounds that broke the peaceful silence were the wind through the churchyard, and the tinkle of decade against decade, as the priest told to listening Mary his chaplet-beads. The light of the altar-lamp shone upon his lifted face. His eyes were fixed upon the Tabernacle door, where Hungerford's followed them. Behind that gilt door—What ? A line he had heard somewhere recurred to him and haunted him. "A miracle of love," he repeated ; "a miracle of love." What did the words mean ? Where had he heard them ? Suddenly he remembered. He had heard them sung, chancing into a little Catholic chapel in the far West, during the beautiful rite of Benediction. The simple words had struck his fancy, and he had jotted them down as they were chanted. As he recalled them, his eyes reverted to the mystic door. Involuntarily, he sunk upon his knees. His eyes filled with tears. What peace, what rest for his doubt-tossed, tired soul, could this sweet faith in the Real Presence be but his.

He rose noiselessly, and stole into the loft. The little organ was open, and a ray of starlight glistened on its keys. With one hand he struck them softly, gliding from chord to chord as he adjusted the stops. Then he began to sing. His voice was a baritone ; not strong, but true

and sweet. He sung the verses slowly, improvising little interludes between them :

He broods within the silent shrine,
As in its nest the dove ;
His Flesh as bread, His Blood as wine,
In miracle of love.

With eye of faith, O look and see
Not bread, not wine alone,
But Him who died for thee, for me,
That we might be His own !

Upon His Brow the thorns' sharp crown—
Within His Hand, the reed ;
From sore Wounds five, His Blood drips down,
His Eyes with sad tears bleed.

Yet His soft smile, how sweet, O see,
From mute Lips bruised apart !
It saith, “ I gave My Life for thee,—
My child, give Me thine heart ! ”

Shall I deny His tender 'quest ?—
Nay, Christ, at Thy dear Feet,
Behold me, at Thy sweet behest,
In sacrifice complete.

In hyssop of Thy Blood divine,
But wash me from my guilt—
Then with me, who no more am mine,
O Christ, do as Thou wilt !

He bowed his head in his hands. A touch on his shoulder roused him.

“ Some day, my brother,” said the priest, softly, “ you will sing those words from your heart.”

The brothers went out together. Reaching the study, Hungerford broached the subject of which, previous to his entry into the church, his mind had been full.

“I saw a ghost to-night,” he said; “a ghost from the days when I officiated, ministerially, at the marriage of the handsomest girl in Smith’s Settlement. To-night she tells me that I did not marry her. What does it mean?”

“You have met her?” exclaimed the priest. “Thank God.”

“Eh?” cried his brother, grimacing off his glasses, “you in the secret? The plot thickens.”

In a few words, the priest told him all he knew of the woman. He listened attentively. When the tale was finished, he sprung up impulsively.

“I am going to make a call,” he said. “Will you accompany me?”

The priest took out his watch.

“It is nearly ten o’clock!” he objected.

“The house I am going to is an all-night house,” persisted Hungerford, “and we can reach it in ten minutes. Will you go or not?”

“I will go,” said the priest; and the two went out together.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CLERGY VERSUS LAITY.

When, a quarter of an hour later, the brothers were ushered into the Harriman drawing-room, it was, by happy chance, deserted. Steele, hastily shutting behind him the heavy door hidden by the library portières, lest the boisterous voices of his guests should scandalize his clerical callers, welcomed them with a cordiality by which he vainly sought to conceal his surprise at their late call. His proffered hand, however, Hungerford rejected.

"I must tell you frankly," he said, "that I do not come as a friend."

Steele bowed in silence, and motioned them to seats. He suspected that some of his dashing friends had incurred the clerical anathema, and that he was about to be called to an account in their stead; in which case of mistaken zeal, he resolved to give the clergymen a severe lesson. His suspicion, however, was sharply dissolved by Hungerford's first words.

"Mr. Harriman," he said, "upon our first meeting your name impressed me as a familiar one. An hour ago I recalled the circumstances of my previous acquaintance with it. In consequence, I have come to ask you for the history, as you know it, of the poor girl known here—God help her!—only as Freshet Sal."

Steele started, and then flushed angrily. The com-

mand veiled by the courteously-worded request, did not escape him. It set him at his worst. His obligations as a host, as a gentleman, were forgotten.

“To a parson,” he sneered, “the story of a Magdalen, especially of such a handsome Magdalen——”

Hungerford interrupted him.

“When you imply that she is a Magdalen,” he said, “you are a coward, a traitor, and a liar. And you know it!”

Steele sprang up, white with wrath.

“You are under my roof,” he panted, “and as you doubtlessly remember, your cloth protects you. But if you think that you can insult me with impunity——”

He fell back, quailing under Hungerford’s relentless words.

“You are a traitor to the dead ; a coward, because your victim is a woman ; a liar, since you know, even as I know it, that she was your dead brother’s wife, that she is his lawful widow, the mother of his legitimate child.”

“You—you are——” stammered Steele, with paling lips.

“The minister who married her.”

The great bronze clock, swinging its gilded pendulum in the adjacent hall, struck the eleventh hour. Voices floated from the library. Against the window the night-wind brushed, now and again rustling a dead leaf against the pane.

“I see,” said Steele, after a moment’s silence, “that I shall have to tell you the whole story.”

He took a hasty glance into the hall, and drew the portières closer. Then he turned back to his guests with a taunting laugh.

“The story,” he said, “is a love-story, including ring

and register and parson's fee. Yet it is a story of love only; not of marriage. Do I offend? *Peccavi!* I forgot that I spoke not to men, but to clergymen. Can the cloth absolve me?"

They passed the insult in silence. With insolent nonchalance he flung himself upon a couch heaped with sumptuous cushions, telling his story lightly, between puffs of his cigar.

"Between five and six years ago," he said, my "brother met a tragic death in a little mining-camp in the Sierras. On his death-bed he sent for me, but he was dead before I reached him. The woman Sal stood by his bier. She claimed to have been his wife, but her certificate was—ahem!—missing; and the minister said to have performed the little ceremony had vanished, none knew where. If I laughed at her little story, who could blame me? Nevertheless, she had a claim upon me. Jack had left a legacy behind him—an unborn child."

From the library echoed a shout of ribald laughter. The clock in the hall chimed the quarter-hour. Outside the night-wind moaned like an unshrived ghost.

"I returned to the camp, when Jack was laid at rest," he said, "with a softened heart for the woman. She was a regally handsome creature, and her passionate eyes haunted me. Jack's dead face, too, had pleaded for her. What if her tale should be true? The rumor of a previous lover reached me—'Engineer Jim,' whom her coquettishness had driven from the camp before my brother reached it. But beauty will have besiegers. I thought no less of her for that. In fact, I came to believe her honest. In the days of her youth, some canting parson had brought her up in the way she should go, and she had not departed from it intentionally. Jack had de-

ceived her. She had never been his legal wife, she was not his legal widow; another and less worthy woman, through a clerical ceremony which preceded, by years, your Reverence's little farce, having pre-empted both honorable titles."

"The name of the woman—your proof!" cried Hungerford.

"The Christian name of the woman, now dead, was Rose; of her maiden-name there is no record; her married name, —when Jack married her she was a divorced wife—I will tell you when I have finished my story. My investigations took time to complete. In the meantime, Jack's child was born—a hopeless cripple. As I said before, I felt a duty to it. I felt a duty likewise to my dead brother's name. Therefore I gave the woman her choice between surrendering the child to us, and guarding the secret of its parentage, thus shielding the Harriman name. When she chose the latter course, as the lesser of the two evils, I imposed one inexorable condition—that she should bring the child to Newfield and live in dependence upon, in submission to, me. My threat to rob her of her child, for which she has the savage, passionate fondness of the tigress for her young, compelled her to accept it. The rest you know. The humble Freshet cabin was her own choice. God knows I have grudged her nothing. My conscience does not reproach me on that score. The child has had the constant care of our own physician; the woman every comfort she would accept from my hands. She is bitter, because her shame galls her proud, and I admit, pure spirit. Her passionate nature has not been able to resist an occasional open defiance of me, in revenge. In consequence, Newfield suspects a scandal. You wonder, perhaps, that I submit. I have, alas! no choice.

You, who know the world, will understand that having hid the secret in the beginning, I am compelled, in self-defence, to hide it to the end. Our respective positions—the woman's and mine—are, in fact, reversed. I once held her in my power. She now holds me in hers. Happily for me, she is unconscious of her advantage. You are surprised, perhaps, at my reckless frankness. I trust to your clerical charity and discretion, as well as to your honor. To publish her shame would be to do the woman no good ; to desecrate the grave of my brother, to break the heart of my good old father—one of whose tenderest memories is that of his ‘little lad, as grow'd up and died.’ Finally, the child's death is now a matter of weeks—of months, at longest. It is the woman's own wish to remain, meantime, in the Freshet cabin. Whenever, wherever she goes, I will provide for her. Freshet Sal's true story you have now heard to its end.”

“Your proof !” re-demanded Hungerford, inexorably.

With a triumphant smile, Steele stepped toward the library. Flinging open the oaken door, he called to some one within. In answer to his summons, appeared Rundell.

“Allow me to present the divorced first husband of my brother's legal wife and widow, Rose Harriman, previously Rose Rundell,” he said, as they walked down the drawing-room together. “Rundell, genuflect to the reverend Harneys.”

“Will you swear to this ?” demanded Hungerford.

From his breast he took a pocket-Bible, and laid it on an adjacent table.

For the first time, Steele quailed. Rundell, after a scornful glance at him, stepped forward.

"I swear it, willingly," he said. And laid his hand on the book, and took the oath.

As the brothers, convinced and sorrowful, departed, Steele turned to Rundell.

"You beat the devil!" he ejaculated. "The d—d words stuck in my throat."

"I swore to the truth," growled Rundell, doggedly.

"To the truth!" repeated Steele, bewildered, "but—but—"

"But—but—" mocked Rundell, "you are no whit brighter than your reverend Harneys, or you would divine the mental reservation by which I omitted to explain that the second marriage ceremony, null and void in consequence—did not follow, but preceded the divorce, by a half-year!"

"The same mental reservation," sneered Steele, "by which you fooled me so successfully six years ago. Perhaps you think I thank you for your oath to-night. On the contrary, I curse you for it. But for you, no lies, no perjurious oaths, were needed in my defence. You have been the evil genius of my life, even as you were of my brother's. When, at the time of Jack's death, you hid the truth, who alone knew it—when you lied to me, swore that his marriage was illegal, that the woman's virtue was but assumed, to arouse my sympathy; you did me a bad turn, Rundell. You did me a worse one, when, too late by far for me to avow it, you revealed the truth. My life since has been one long fear, even as poor wronged Sal's has been one long anguish. Do you think I do not know your motive for wishing to hold me in your power? *I learned too much, when I went to the camp, of my brother's life and death.* You loved your wife, though your brutality drove her from you. When Jack, in his boyish folly,

swore to protect her, you vowed to be revenged. With Jack's death in Smith's Settlement your slow revenge was consummated. Virtually, you were his murderer. Sal told me as much, five years ago. Last week, Rose, on her death-bed, confirmed her."

"Rose——dead!" gasped Rundell, reeling to a chair.

"Dead and buried!"

With an effort Rundell recovered himself.

"Come! come!" he remonstrated, forcing a smile, though his lips were ashen; "such insane talk is d—d nonsense; and as for dead men's accusations, and idle threats, they're neither here nor there, and we can't waste time on them. You stand by me, and I'll stand by you! We are useful, reciprocally; and, hang me if, in spite of your curses, I don't like you! We understand each other pretty well, my boy, and it's Satan's choice between us. We'll call the past square, and begin a new deal. Shake hands on it."

But Steele rejected his hand.

"Be devilish careful that the new game's no bluff one," he warned, sulkily.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DRUCE'S CROWN DRAWS NEAR.

The following day Hungerford passed in solitary meditation. He thought the case over and over until his brain reeled, but he could see no gleam of hope with which to lighten Sal's despairing heart. If the tale had been Steele Harriman's only, he would have insisted upon further proof; but Rundell's prompt corroboration and oath seemed to place the matter beyond doubt. In the afternoon he went to the parsonage, and confided the story to Druce, who heard it with mingled relief and pain. Cruel story though it was, it did not verify Dr. Keene's suspicions.

"I think with you," he said, as Hungerford concluded, "that this sad story must be the true one. Harriman could scarcely have fabricated it, or have been corroborated so promptly, taken as he was, by surprise. I believe that any attempt to prove the girl a legal wife will fail, and result only in giving publicity to her misfortune, and to the stain on the Harriman escutcheon, which old John Harriman believes to be without reproach. If any good could come to the woman from betraying her secret, no Harriman, innocent or guilty, should stand in the way. As it is, to respect the woman's silence, since the child cannot live to suffer by it, is, I think, our sad duty."

Hungerford rose.

"I promised her," he said, "that she should be righted. That I cannot fulfil my promise is a hard thing to tell her, and a harder thing for her to hear."

Druce had followed him to the door. The afternoon sun shone on his chastened face, on his sad, calm eyes, on his patient, tender lips.

"Life is a hard thing for us all," he said. "It is the cross, but after it——"

The setting sun, smoldering in the western heavens, burst into ruddy glory. He held his arms toward it with transfigured face.

"After it," he murmured, with a tremulous sigh of happiness, "comes the crown!"

Around his head the golden sun-rays flickered. It seemed to Hungerford as if already Druce's crown was near.

"There is the light of another world on his face," he said to his brother, a few hours later, as they walked together toward Sal's cabin. "The chastened flesh is freeing the pure spirit. Already its white wings are pluming for heavenward flight."

"God speed it!" murmured the priest, lifting his hat.

The Freshet waters were gurgling softly. The breeze, as it blew from them, was cool and moist with their spray. Over the last rays of the setting sun brooded the twilight shadows. The cabin door was ajar. Sal was moving about the interior, engaged in some domestic duty. By the window, Waif was nestling contentedly in Engine Jim's brawny arms.

As the visitors passed in, Sal introduced them.

"This 'yer's th' old parson ez stood by me ter th' Settlement, in time o' need," she said, "an' th' Father 'yer an' yo' ain't fur bein' strangers. This 'yer's Jim."

Jim shuffled forward to shake hands.

"I'm *de-lighted* ter see yo' both!" he said, cordially.
"Jest *de-lighted*!"

"This," explained the priest to Hungerford, "is the first lover, of whom Harriman spoke."

"Ah!" Hungerford's glasses were grimaced off, and readjusted in a twinkling. "If the strength of your heart, my man, is to be judged by your strength of hand, I should say that the woman you love can rely upon you."

As Hungerford laughingly rubbed his crushed member, Jim looked abashed, and sheepishly took his leave.

"Yo're right," said Sal, as her eyes followed him. "Th' woman he loves kin an' does rely onter him."

"And what about the woman who loves him?" asked Hungerford. "You feel your cross heavy, my girl. Think what it would be if you could not tell that honest fellow that you are sinned against, not sinning!"

She crouched down on the little hearthstone, hiding her face in her hands. Sinued against! The two words told her that her wrong was irreparable, that Hungerford could not right her. She had not realized how much faith she had placed in his impulsive promise, until now, when it was failing her. He read her aching heart, and his own ached for her.

"I—I believed that I could right you, Sal," he said, brokenly. "I tried my best, God knows!"

"Thank yo' kindly," she sobbed.

He took a few turns through the room, whisking off and on his glasses with extraordinary rapidity. Then he halted before her, laying his hand on her bowed head.

"My girl," he said, "something tells me that you are

fond of this Jim. He offers you a new and honorable life. Accept it."

Her lifted face was resolute.

"While thar's th' soil o' shame on my hand," she said, "as dead lips kissed onter it, I'll never put it inter th' clean palm o' th' man as loves me—o' th' man—I—love!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

KINGSLEY SAYS GOOD-BYE.

During the ensuing winter, the Newfield banker went from bad to worse. Indulgence increased to dissipation, and his face, reflective of his soul, took on a grossness whose tale all eyes could read. Scandalous suspicions concerning him filtered through masculine sieves into feminine receivers, and reports injurious not only to the banker, but likewise to the bank, were soon in circulation. The result was financial rather than social. Face to face with him, there were few who could resist the magnetic personal charm which still stood him in good stead ; but out of his presence, his dissipations, extravagances, and reckless speculations were added to one another, and prophetic heads shaken over the ominous sum-total. Individual distrust bred general distrust, and faith in the "Harriman luck" began to waver. Rival banks, taking advantage of the turn in the tide of public favor, started and sustained a hue and cry against him, and anonymous reports were circulated as to the precarious financial condition of the Newfield Bank. The Newfield banker set his teeth, and plunged into deeper dissipation, wilder extravagances, more reckless speculation, than before. Newfield understood the defiance, and gloated over "th' pluck o' it!"

"Th' young chap's got th' grit o' th' old Harry,"

chuckled one old Adam, "an' by blazes, I'll stick ter him!"

Adam had his followers, and in due time, the fickle tide of opinion turned again, reinstating both bank and banker in public favor.

" Didn't I say ez he'd got th' grit o' th' old Harry?" triumphed Adam; "an' th' old Harry, he takes keer o' his own!"

" He must take uncommon fine care of you, then!" retorted a sharp-tongued neighbor.

" No," responded Adam, unabashed, "he hain't got no time left over, he's thet thar much okkerpied wi' yo'!"

The crisis safely passed, the banker drew a breath of intense relief. Like Hamlet's madness, his apparently reckless defiance of Newfield had had its method. Nevertheless he had run a risk greater, almost, than he cared to realize. He understood the menace of the failure of public faith in him, no less a menace because the faith was now re-established. He knew that he would be wise to heed its warning.

Isolde, meanwhile, was living her life like one in a bad dream, her one consolation being her baby—the human pillow upon which her tired heart rested. Her chief effort, of late, had been to hide Steele's dissipation from his father, and owing to the old man's simple life, the task was not difficult. He retired, except on rare occasions, at a primitively early hour, so that his son's nightly excesses were not suspected by him, and if, as was seldom the case, he was present at the late breakfast at which Steele appeared heavy-eyed and listless, with appetite only for coffee and seltzer, his physical deterioration was ascribed, as Isolde contrived that it should be, to too close

application to the bank. Happily, Steele himself, even in his worst moments, seconded her deception. There was a tenderness in his heart for his simple old father that even yet he had not outlived ; and he knew better even than Isolde, that to discover a flaw in his idol would break the old man's heart. Among the house's nightly frequenters, of whose real type he had no suspicion, he came and went at will, in almost pathetic pride and happiness. There was not one of them but treated him with deference and respect, instinctively concealing their real selves from his unsuspecting eyes. His personal enjoyment of their society was supplemented by his pride in the son who had attracted such a brilliant circle about him. In his simple eyes they were all as kings and princes—"grand-folk, friends of his son Steele." One night when, contrary to his usual custom, he had lingered till the departure of the guests, he looked after them with tenderly regretful eyes.

"I wish," he murmured, "as how mother had lived fur ter see 'em. She was powerful fond o' cump'ny-folk, was mother—powerful fond ! We never had none fine enough fur her in them days. In course, I warn't the man ter bring 'em round her. I wish as how she'd lived ter see an' know 'em—through my own son Steele."

For some time after Steele's defiance of Rundell, the man absented himself from the Harriman house. Isolde drew a breath of happy relief. Of her many uncongenial guests, he was still the most abhorrent to her. Later, however, he reappeared. In the meantime Isolde received an anonymous letter.

It arrived one morning as she sat at breakfast, Kingsley, who had been their guest over-night, seated by her side, Steele scanning his paper opposite her. His

father had taken his simple meal hours earlier, and was already on his way to town. Outside the window, in the morning sunshine, John Steele, now a noble boy, was leaping in his nurse's arms.

The letter in question was one of three letters lying by her plate. The first was an invitation to some social entertainment ; the second, a long missive from her mother, which she laid aside for perusal, later ; the third was rose-tinted and musk-scented, and directed in a scrawling, unfamiliar hand. Isolde broke the envelope with a feeling of distaste. The contents were without address or signature, and consisted of only two lines.

“Ask your husband the name of the man who led Magdalén across the chasm. He knows him!”

She read the words and re-read them, a half-dozen, a dozen times ; then the letter dropped from her lax hold. There was a rushing as of angry waters in her ears ; there were letters of fire flaming before her eyes ; there was something, a terrible something, cold and heavy, clutching her numb heart. She tried to lift her hand to it, but it failed to obey her. A darkness closed about her, dense, and chill, and horrible ; an awful gulf opened below her, —a black vacuum of fathomless depth ! She was falling —falling—

“Harriman !” cried Kingsley, catching her slender figure as it swayed toward him.

The darkness was lifting. Some one was bearing her out of the black gulf—up, up, to the air and daylight. As her eyes reopened, they fell upon the rose-tinted letter. She grasped it and held it toward her husband. He read it, then tossed it across her to Kingsley, looking at her in blank despair.

“Is——it——true ?” she panted.

Her anguish maddened him. He was about to hurl a brutal defiance at her, when Kingsley interrupted him. His face was suddenly drawn and white, and his eyes wore a look of hopeless pain, but his voice was calm and resolute.

“It is true, Mrs. Harriman,” he cried. “Your husband knows the man. You too, know—Ralph Kingsley!”

Even as she recoiled, a look of intense relief flashed into her face. It hurt him cruelly, but he made no sign. Steele stared incredulously at him for an instant, doubting if he had heard aright. As he realized the full significance of the words, the shamed blood surged to his face.

“By heaven!” he began, recklessly.

“Not a word!” interrupted Kingsley, in a voice of stern command. Then he turned back to Isolde.

“I suppose, Mrs. Harriman,” he said, “that there is nothing left for me to say to you, save—good-by!”

As she hesitated there was a tap at the window, and her baby’s face looked at her through the pane. His wee red mouth, like a crushed rose-bud, was pressed against the glass. She heard his coo and gurgle—the inarticulate yet eloquent language of love’s sweetest phase—child-love. Yielding to a tender impulse, she seized Kingsley’s hand in both her own.

“You are my baby’s godfather,” she said. “It was the wish of my heart that—she—should be his godmother! For her sake, I say to you, No. ‘Good-by’ is not the only word left you! There is a nobler word which I beg, I pray that you will speak. It is—reparation!”

His pale face flushed suddenly and vividly.

“Oh, impossible! impossible!” he cried.

She relinquished his hand and stood back, looking at him with sudden proud disdain.

“Then I admit,” she said, “that the only word left you is ‘good-by.’”

He bowed, and went in silence.

That morning, for the first time since the bitter hour when she had watched with tearless eyes the dreams, the hopes, the ambitions, the consummations of her artist-youth, fade from flame to ashes, she took up her pen.

This is what she wrote.

MAGDALEN.*

Pity her, pray for her,
Sisters, who scorn her !

Turn not away with that merciless air.

Somewhere, to-night, some poor mother may mourn her,
Sobbing to Mary her shame and her prayer.

Once she was pure as an innocent child is—
Once she was lovely to angels and men.

Pity her, pray for her, who now defiled is—
Save her, our poor Magdalen !

Mary, called Magdalen,
Sinner, unchaste one,

Christ forgave freely, “because she loved much.”

Shall we, like Pharisees, scorn our debas'd one,
Shudder away from her glance and her touch ?

Spurning her, shunning her, sister and woman—
Shrinking aside lest our robes be defiled ?

Christian we are not, nor even kind human,
Christ, to Thy prodigal child !

* Republished by kind permission of the Boston *Pilot*.

Little we pure women
Know of her anguish,
Scorched by the flames of our blush and our sneer ;
Little we know what her spirit might vanquish,
Entered once more in Life's ranks as our peer.
What is her brazen bold smile but a mask for
Woman-face seared by a shame past compare ?
God's nor man's mercy her mute lips dare ask for—
Her's is the smile of despair !

Yet she is sinned against,
Sorely as sinning !—
(Stand forth, ye tempters, unmasked in your guile ;
Dissolute men, who to-night may be winning
Sweets from pure lips that your soiled lips defile !
Forth in your lust and your craven dishonor !
Stand by her side in her shame as her sin !
Scarlet the letter the world brands upon her—
Share it, ye sinners akin !)

Bid from your portals their
Gilded depravement ;
Shun them as lepers unclean for pure wives !
Turn to their victim, the girl of the pavement—
Take her within the white fold of your lives.
We alone stand between her and the river ;
Spurn her, and listen !—its tide tolls her knell.—
'Neath its dark waves,—shrive we not, nor forgive her,
Opens the suicide's hell !

Save her, in name of Christ's
Pitiful Mother !
Back from the dark brink, O call, ere too late !
We are her keepers, as Cain of his brother ;
If her soul perish, on us be her fate !

Cant not of Christ as her only Forgiver,
Stoning her, meantime, from hearthstone and door.
Echo His words, and with Him bless and shrive her—
“ *Magdalen! Peace! Sin no more!* ”

Some day—may God speed it—
Mother who mourns her,
Sobbing to Mary your prayer and your shame !
Some day, the Pharisee-world that now scorns her
Once more shall honor the Magdalen’s name.
Purged then by tears, as soiled lily by rain is,
She, like evangel, shall preach unto men :
“ *Be sins as scarlet, repentance not vain is!* —
Christ shrived the first Magdalen ! ”

CHAPTER XXIX.

EXIT RUNDELL.

The second winter of Isolde's marriage came to an abrupt end. A wintry blizzard of extreme severity was followed by a phenomenal rise of temperature, culminating in a series of balmy days which proved to be the harbingers of a premature and unseasonably sultry spring. The pioneers of the town croaked ominously of the spring three and thirty years earlier, when just such a sudden thaw had melted the snows and sent the swollen streams pouring in floods down the mountains, till the overflow of the Arkansas resulted in the fatal Freshet from which the Newfield waters derived their name. Councils were held by the city fathers, and resolutions drawn up, concerning the immediate inspection and repairing of the Freshet dyke; but the dyke failed to profit thereby, the resolutions proving the only tangible result of the conventions.

Simultaneously with this premature spring, a season of dire financial depression dawned throughout the country. A cry of hard times was followed by divers insignificant financial panics, which, confined to the Eastern market though they were, reacted upon the West, thrilling it with the presage of disaster. Bulletins were issued, containing the latest telegraphic reports from all the great stock-centres; and these were discussed by groups of

gloomy-faced men who feared the effect of the general depression upon the axis about which all local financial interests rotated—the Newfield Bank. As has been said, the fast life of the young banker, which must have been fatal to his financial interests in a more cautious and conservative community, had not advanced them, even here. Nevertheless, a general blind belief was entertained that, by hook or crook, the bank would pull through—faith in the Harriman luck surviving faith in the Harriman honor. The death of even the latter faith, indeed, was comparative rather than absolute ; it being subject to daily resuscitation as old John Harriman, seated in his favorite nook in the swell of the bank-window, waxed more and more eloquent upon the financial soundness of "my son Steele," and "th' biggest bank this side o' 'Frisco !" The young banker, recognizing the favorable effect of the paternal tribute, smiled somewhat sardonically. In truth, he was watching the approach of disaster much as the condemned murderer watches the erection of his gallows. Of a sudden, however, the market rebounded, and the prospect of a steady rise suggested the redemption of the fortunes swamped by the recent depression. Stocks were bought up with feverish haste, and held for inflated values. The rise continued. In the very hour which lifted the temperature of the market to fever-heat, a fateful thing happened. The man who, single-handed, with almost super-human strength and daring, had turned the tide of finance and forced it from ebb to flow—a railroad king and central figure of the most powerful "ring" in Wall Street—dropped on the floor of the Exchange, smitten by sudden death. On the instant there was a fatal fall of the stocks controlling the market, and upon the further rise of which half the fortunes of the country were staked. A

panic ensued, the contagion of which spread like wild-fire over the entire country. The fortunate few stood firm, and reaped a golden after-harvest. The unfortunate many, not strong enough financially to keep their feet, were swept relentlessly into the gulf of ruin. A year earlier, the Newfield banker could have stood one of the few ; but now he threatened to sink with the many. The auspicious rebound of the market had tempted him to make a speculative spurt in which, on the desperate impulse which impels the gambler to stake his life on his last throw, he had madly involved his last dollar. To withdraw in the face of the panic meant a loss which must entail instant and fatal disaster. Not to withdraw meant, upon the other hand, a strain of indefinite duration, which the bank, in its precarious financial condition, could not survive. Resources which had been open to him in former difficulties now failed him. But he was not in despair. One untried resource, for years held in reserve, was left him. It was not among the probabilities that it would—he said “could”—fail him. The time was come to test it.

In the stellar system of the firmament of Western speculation, a certain Isaac Solomon scintillated as a star of the first magnitude. Mr. Solomon was of Hebrew parentage, but of New England birth ; and his heritage of Jewish enterprise was supplemented by an acquisition of Yankee shrewdness. Rising, originally, from a shop ornamented exteriorly by three gilded balls, he had flashed like a meteor across the sky of the Republic, his golden orbit, financial in perihelion but political in aphelion, illuminating the domain of the White House with the vivid and steadfast velocity of the mis-called fixed star. Upon this man Solomon, Steele Harriman’s eyes were turned. Already he had met him, and during the meeting, the young

banker had insinuated that he was cognizant of more of Mr. Isaac Solomon's political intrigues than that cautious individual had been wont to confide to the uninitiated. Thereupon the wise Solomon had temporized straightway, and admitted the young banker to the outer circle of his satellites. This concession he had supplemented, however, by a gratuitous word of advice.

"You are a clever young man," he said, "an exceedingly clever young man; and your manipulation of the screw is admirable. But permit me to give you a word of warning. It is never safe to apply the screw too relentlessly. It is always within the possibilities that relative positions may be reversed, and in such case the retaliation-screw is apt to be felt—unpleasantly."

Steele, with a scoff at the implied threat, had gone on his way rejoicing. He knew that the man was, to a certain measure, in his power; and did not then exercise his power to the utmost, only because he preferred to bide his time. In face of the ruin now before him he felt his time was come. He took a flying-trip to Cheyenne, intercepting the magnate as he was speeding coastward in the sumptuous chariot of American royalty, a private car, and extracted from him a promise to stop over on his return-trip, for a night in Newfield. The intervening days he passed in feverish suspense. His preparations for the entertainment of his guest were extravagant, lavish to ostentation. Decorators, caterers, florists from Denver, Omaha, even Chicago, were pressed into service. Isolde timidly asking to be excused from appearing on the occasion, was answered by an oath that frightened her, and imperatively bidden to order the most gorgeous dinner-gown that money could command.

"He lives like his royal namesake in all his glory," he

said, "and his women are Queens of Sheba in attire. You are not only to equal, but to surpass them. Mind that! We must dazzle him, or die in the attempt!"

Mr. Isaac Solomon, a dark-faced, smiling-lipped man, whose keen, alert black eyes flashed in curious contrast to the sullen brows that shaded them, arrived in Newfield on the dreariest and wildest of nights. The wind howled like an avenging spirit. The rain surged down in angry torrents. The night was of awful blackness—blackness the denser in contrast with the dazzling forks of flame flashing here, there, and everywhere in the lurid heavens. Over the shrieking wind sounded the thunder's menace. Its peals were heavy and stifled, jarring the earth with dull, reverberant thuds. Altogether it was a night of evil omen. Mr. Solomon, in the luxurious shelter of the Harriman carriage, hugged himself, metaphorically, in congratulation that the omen was not for him.

Descending from the carriage, he hesitated for an instant, surprised and dazed by the luxury surrounding him. From the carriage-step to the house-door stretched an awning banked up both sides of its interior by tall green plants, among whose glossy leaves glowed colored lights, like brilliant tropical blossoms. The doors of the house were thrown open. He caught sight of the roseate lights within, of waving palms and rare exotics, over which floated, like a breath of songful summer, the strains of unseen violins. His feet, as he entered the splendid vestibule, resounded on costly marble, then sunk noiselessly into the depths of priceless carpets and dusky oriental rugs. Rare tapestries, massive carvings, delicate frescoes, allured his eyes. An exquisite perfume floated about him, exhaled by everything he approached or touched. He entered the drawing-room like one in a

dream. It was a dream well suited to warm and quicken his sensuous, semi-oriental blood.

A number of guests awaited him. All were men of whom he knew already, as rising or risen capitalists and politicians ; but with whom personally, but for a single exception, he was unacquainted. This exception, however, was not made evident. Not by the flicker of an eyelash, as the guests were introduced, did Mr. Solomon betray his previous acquaintance with Rundell.

Isolde, a lovely vision in glistening white and silver, with Althea, regal in violet velvet, from which her shoulders rose like those of a sculptured Juno, supplied the feminine complement. Mr. Solomon, bowing to Althea, involuntarily exclaimed, "Splendid!" Then he turned back to his hostess. His opinion of her did not escape him. Neither did his eyes leave her face.

As dinner was announced, Isolde took Solomon's arm. Footmen in livery held back the portières, as the guests filed through the suite of splendid rooms. The walls were banked with gorgeous hot-house roses ; the ceilings hung with lights, festooned with flowers. In the vestibule of the dining-room played a perfumed fountain. Lilies floated on its waters, and among them sailed one snow-white swan.

They entered under an arch of lights and flowers. The oval table stood in the middle of the spacious room. Its centre-piece was a pool of shimmering glass, edged with quivering ferns and drooping valley-lilies. From side to side played tiny jets of water, spraying the nether glass and showering with baby-dews the fresh young flowers. The embroidered cloth was white, of a soft, rich woof, in whose luxurious thickness the massive service

seemed to nestle. A fringe of valley-lilies trailed from it to the floor. Glass of varied tint and shape, fragile as breath, and finely-cut as a diamond, caught the rose-tinted lights and multiplied them in myriad scintillating reflections. A deep green jungle framed the room, refreshing in its suggestion of hush and shadow. The splash of waters was heard within it ; and mingled with them, as Pan's reed with the gurgle from the river-brink, a harp's strain sounded.

On Isolde's right hand sat Solomon, with Rundell beside him ; on her left a titled Englishman of hunting tastes—a manly young Nimrod whose vivid pink and white complexion put the indoor American complexion to shame. Althea sat between Steele and the president of a bonanza gold-mine company, and opposite her sat the president of an influential Chicago bank. These, with a few other well-known financiers of the speculator type, represented the financial element. Governor Rushing, of Nebraska, whose future nomination as a candidate for the presidential office was already discussed by his party, with a couple of fellow-politicians and a prominent Western editor, made up the group which old John Harriman as incongruously as happily completed. In the midst of the almost royal splendor he sat with the same unconscious, simple ease with which he had once partaken of his frugal meals at the pioneer's pine-board table ; glorying in the pomp and luxury surrounding him like a credulous child to whom, while all things are new and beautiful, none are wonderful. Even his cup of pleasure, however, had its dregs of pain.

"I wish," he confided in a wistful voice to the agast young Englishman who neglected his terrapin to stare through his eye-glass at this new specimen of the curious

genus American—"I wish ez how mother had lived ter see it."

"O ya—as, ya—as!" amiably responded the heir to an earldom, after a mystified hesitation. "'Pon honor, I wish so too, I'm su—ah."

A moment later, however, as at one of their host's brilliant sallies the company burst into enthusiastic applause, the old man sprung to his feet in an access of rapturous pride and happiness.

"That there's my son Steele," he cried, designating their host with outstretched finger—"my son Steele!"

No one laughed. For the moment there was an almost reverent hush over the merry party. In the sudden silence, the anteroom and jungle fountains blended their liquid music. The harp sighed in the jungle-shadow. Afar, the viols played.

"Chicago," admitted the bank-president, sipping his frappéd champagne, "is supposed to be the Garden City, but evidently the Garden of Eden has escaped it. Newfield, indisputably, is the New-World Paradise."

Old John Harriman applauded.

"A Paradise with an Eve," whispered Solomon, with a bow to Isolde.

"Yet Chicago is the Fair—er," put in the editor, mischievously.

A general groan rewarded him.

"Chicago represents the West—Newfield only the wild, wild West!" distinguished Steele, modestly.

"Is this," queried his lordship, with an admiring glance about him, "wepwesentative of the—aw—'wild, wild West?'"

"No, it is representative of the 'golden West,'" replied Althea.

The gold-mine president approved.

"Mrs. Rounds has said it," he cried. "Were it not the 'golden West,' it would be still the 'wild, wild West.' Gold softens the barbaric to the picturesque, and weds Western picturesqueness to Eastern sybaritism. It is the only alchemy which neither man nor nature resists."

"How about greenbacks, silver, the humble but useful copper?" asked the Chicago banker, facetiously.

"Doomed, one and all!" announced Althea. "Like the red man, they must go. Your Oscar's mission was not so wild, after all, Lord Earlescourt. Even sordid finance now has its aesthetic side. Our cultured eyes resent the ugliness of the baser specie. We exchange our bills and coins for sunflower gold——"

"And swear over the discount!" concluded Governor Rushing, who, with the taste of an epicure, was sipping old claret with his game.

His fellow-politician pretended to weep.

"I refuse to go to Congress," he said. "Mrs. Rounds implies it to be a foregone conclusion that I cannot pass my bill."

"Excuse him, Mrs. Harriman," begged the Governor. "His election has turned his head."

"No," retorted the accused, "it only turned my politics."

The Englishman looked interested. "Is that an Amewicanism?" he asked, as the laugh subsided.

"No, it's an Irishism," replied his host.

"Which proves," laughed Althea to the Briton, "that John Bull is mis-named. It is Paddy Bull, you know, by all the rights of paradox."

"W—weally!" stammered the addressed, too courte-

ous to contradict, but taking it out of Althea with his eye-glass.

“Oh, Johnnie’s named after the bull in the china-shop,” put in the Governor, who had Celtic blood in his veins. “Poor little Ireland is the china-shop.”

The Englishman, who had been reared in an atmosphere of Royal Worcester and Crown Derby, protested.

“Oh, weally, now! there isn’t any—aw—I wish china, don’t you know?” he remonstrated.

“No, Irish china’s all—Cork!” assented his host.

“How about Belleek?” put in the Governor, loyally.

“Have you shot any buffalo?” asked Isolde, hastening to the nobleman’s rescue.

“Of course he has,” interposed Rundell. “Englishmen come to America only to bag big game.”

“Does the game always fall?” asked one of the speculators, alive to the innuendo.

“No,” retorted Rundell. “It rises—above par.”

Solomon smiled appreciatively. “When financier meets financier,” he parodied. “But of course all such allusions are Greek to you, Mrs. Harriman?”

“No,” chuckled Rundell, who was drinking freely, “they are only dialect.”

His tone was insolently significant. Solomon gave him a warning glance. Isolde, however, had not heeded him.

“Speaking of dialect,” she said, “are you aware that our Western dialect promises to be the future Volapuk? Papers, magazines, novels, even dramas, abound with it. Not only the great American novel—which, by the way, report says that that pessimistic genius, Hamlin Garland, is now writing in the *Arena*, but which I, loyal alike to my sex and to Colorado, look for from Patience Stapleton, who unites the brain of the man with the hopeful heart of

the woman—not only the great American novel, I say, but the universal language as well, will come out of the West."

"Fawncy!" exclaimed the Briton, looking up from his sorbet.

"Then the universal language will come from dialect 'as she is spoke,' and not 'as she is writ,'" said the editor, emphatically. "Spoken dialect is music. Written as our authors write it, it scrapes on the mental ear like the twanging of an out-of-tune string. Like our British friend here, I confess to a weakness for the Queen's English. Over my editorial door hangs a legend which I bid my staff read and heed. It runs, 'Who enters here, leaves dialect behind.'"

"I renew my subscription," said Steele, approvingly.

The Englishman caught the word, and adjusted his eye-glass. He thought it possible, being in Western America, that the partakers of this gorgeous "spread" were about to be assessed to defray expenses.

Isolde challenged the editor.

"The failure of dialect in our literature," she said, "lies not at the writer's, but at the critic's door."

"Q. E. D.," responded the challenged, fortifying himself with a glass of Blue Seal Johannisberg.

"The writer," she demonstrated, "lives in, or comes to the West, and studies the dialect from nature. The critic stays in the metropolis, and studies it from a book. The writer learns that the West is not Western, but cosmopolitan; that Western dialect is, in consequence, a polyglot. He transcribes it with infinite care and faithfulness, compares his written duplicate with the oral original, and pronounces his work good. The critic's verdict, on the contrary, is against it. 'Here is a Southernism,' he cries,

triumphantly, comparing the transcribed polyglot with the treatise on purely Western colloquialisms which is his standard ; 'here a flagrant Easternism ; here a turn of speech redolent of the Northern pines.' The writer hides his diminished head, and—borrows the critic's treatise, from which he copies his Western dialect thereafter. Whereat the critic writes, 'great improvement ; dialect true to nature !' and the writer reads, and copies on, and—laughs in his sleeve."

"By Jove ! " said the editor, "I feel tempted to laugh with him. You have converted me, Mrs. Harriman."

"Mrs. Harriman converts everyone," said Rundell. "She is an evangelist of the gospel of beauty."

"I avow myself her disciple," said Solomon, with a bow.

"The only disciple a woman tolerates is herself," said Althea, aping humility as she set out to charm the wealthy Solomon. "It is her *rôle*, and she does not like it usurped. Women are born disciples, Mr. Solomon—men the masters."

"And the slaves," added Rundell, with a boldly admiring glance across the table.

"The master is always the slave," broke out Steele. "'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' Were a hundred representative leaders of the day to compare notes with a hundred of the representative led, I wager a round million that the result would testify to the greater freedom, happiness, and general good fortune of the under-stratum. In human as in physical nature, all the cyclones, lightnings, thunderbolts, etc., fall on the upper crust."

"How about—aw—earthquakes ?" queried the nobleman, scoring a point for Oxford.

"An additional proof of the law in question," persisted Steele. "When the upheaval comes, the upper crust is the swamped ; the lower is pitched to the top."

"Aw, ya—as," meditated the Briton, "in Amewica!"

Solomon rose. Beyond a few general remarks, and a desultory conversation with Isolde, he had not contributed to the conversational *menu*. Of the culinary one, however, he had partaken with the gourmet's conscientiousness and enjoyment. Now that the salad had been followed by a Nesselrode pudding, and the biscuit and Burgundy were appearing on the table, however, his concentrated interest began to diffuse itself. Moreover, the inspiration of rare old wines was in his veins. At the moment he admired his host more than any other man he knew. He was young, handsome, spirited, ambitious, clever, successful, and—he had given him a perfect dinner. His gracious mood inspired him to put his admiration into words. As he rose, his glowing eyes and vivid face commanded attention. He had bided his time ; now it was come. He did not at once make his host his theme, but took his text from the conversational subject of the moment. It was not a bad one—Leaders and Led.

There had been a time in Solomon's early life, when he had advocated the cause of the led, as himself one of them. Now that he had risen to the ranks of the leaders, however, his advocacy of the led was less enthusiastic. He dismissed them with a few comprehensive words which served as an effective introduction to the real subject of his speech. As he spoke on, his voice rang resonantly ; his gestures were forceful, his whole mien impressive.

From the subject of leadership in general, he passed on to the leader in particular, his host ; speaking eloquently of his youth, his enterprise, his success ! He

dilated upon the fruits of that success, visible in the splendor and luxury about him. He drew from the brilliant present of the young banker the horoscope of his still more brilliant future. He hinted that above the crown of wealth waited the higher crown of political office. Steele's face grew radiant. This man prophesied nothing rashly. He knew whereof he spoke. The fulfillment of the young banker's ambitions seemed suddenly within his reach. As he rose to reply, a murmur of admiration went round the table. The disfiguring marks of dissipation, as of all other evils, were, for the hour, obliterated. It was as if an angel's wing had swept over his face, erasing all its sin-traced lines and shadows.

He began by graceful thanks to his guest for his eloquent words, whose compliments he parried by turning them upon Solomon himself. His enterprise and success he set against those of the bowing Hebrew, laughing ironically at the comparison. He reciprocated the laudatory mention which had been made of his surroundings, by a graceful allusion to Solomon's own gorgeous household; whereat the gratified Solomon flushed with honest pleasure. Then, leaving personalities behind him, he took up the subject of leadership where Solomon had dropped it, confining his considerations to leadership in politics, upon the majesty of which, in this American Republic, he dwelt in eloquent words, which the eloquence of his clarion-voice accented.

“To lead,” he cried, “not by the wrong we mis-call right, of blood, birth, name, or heritage—but by the one, the divine right of instinct, impulse, power, born within us! To rise from the ranks, to make our way by force of brain, of will, of endeavor; to march on, up, while the

weak and worthless lag behind us ; to face undaunted, and conquer singlehanded, obstacles small and great that bar our way ; to withstand foes, and, if the fight must be, in fair and equal contest to overthrow them ; to reach, at last, the goals of Fame and Power, and know them ours by right to claim our own—this is to drain the Olympian gods' own nectar, whose sweets the human god alone can know !

“Who is the human god ? Not the king of subjects, not the master of slaves—but the leader of men ! In the royal cup, the draught of power is clotted with the blood that cries for vengeance from its lees. The Republic only, the Republic alone, holds the clean chalice wherein the draught endures both strong and sweet. The life of millions of freemen thrills within it—the warmth of their living hearts, the spell of their dreams, the fire of their faiths, the glow of their hopes, the inspiration of their ambitions. And when to these come fulfilments beyond their promise, consummations higher than their dreams conceived, then, and then only, the leader grasps the priceless ‘spoil of office’—*the consciousness of the mission of office manfully fulfilled !*”

A spell-bound silence followed his speech, broken, an instant later, by plaudits with which the room resounded. The exalted chord which he had struck was in harmony with his auditors’ exalted mood. Exaltation of spirit is born, in saints, of the flesh subdued ; in sinners, of the flesh exultant.

“He’s a deuced—aw—deep thinker,” admitted the Englishman, admiring his host through his eyeglass.

“He’s a d—deuced deep drinker !” retorted Rundell, who had kept pace with his host, glass for glass, and whose head was the worse in consequence.

The Englishman thought the retort too good to monopolize—"just like an aw—Amewican, don't you know?"—and passed it around the table. Under cover of the boisterous applause it evoked, Isolde and Althea stole away.

Left to themselves, the men closed about their host, and discussed his political ambitions, as if their fulfilments were assured. When, an hour later, the group dispersed, Steele's face was flushed with excitement, his eyes shone exultantly. This was life, this was manhood, this was success! Youth and strength, wealth and honor, power and fame!—could the immortal gods ask more?

Rundell had followed Isolde into the drawing - room. The gold-mine president, who had fallen a victim to Althea's statuesque charms, hastened after him. John Harriman had long since slipped away. Governor Rushing made his adieux, a telegram summoning him back to Nebraska having interrupted one of the brilliant after-dinner stories for which he was famous. His fellow-politicians followed him to the carriage, and then, lured by the click of balls, sauntered into the billiard-room, where the rival cues of the American editor and the English nobleman waged an international contest. The financiers, with the freedom of old frequenters of the house, seated themselves at a poker-table in the library. Finally, only Solomon was faithful to the old Madeira. This was as Steele would have had it. He plied his guest's glass, entertaining him, meanwhile, with amusing jest and anecdote, until he saw the effect of the wine in the glowing face and ready smile of the Jewish magnate. Then, with subtle cleverness, he turned the conversation into a graver channel.

From the drawing-room the piano sounded. Solomon looked up from his wine.

“Suppose we join the ladies?” he said. “May I take the liberty of confessing that they are irresistible? I judge that congratulations are still in order——”

Steele waived them, with a smile.

“My wife is young,” he explained; “but we have been married more than two years. We have a son aged a venerable number of months. I really forget how many.”

Solomon sighed.

“I congratulate you,” he said. “I—I never had a child.”

There was a look in his eyes that surprised his host. Heretofore he had found him a man of flint. If the human spark was in him, he would ignite it. He gave an order, inaudible to his guest, to the man who answered his ring, and then, pressing upon Solomon a fresh cigar, plunged into an anecdote which ended just as there was a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of a white-capped maid, bearing in her arms Harriman junior, dewy-eyed and rosy-cheeked from recent slumber.

“My son,” presented the young host, gaily. “John Steele, do honor to your father, and shake hands.”

John Steele’s first impulse was to clench his little fist, curl his little lip, and utter a protesting howl; but as his dazzled eyes began to distinguish the lights and flowers, he changed his weathercock mind, and stretching his hands toward the roses, smiled and crowded.

“Ah!” remarked Solomon, “a fine child, very. His mother’s eyes and hair, and a promise of your physique. An exceptionally enviable inheritance.”

His eyes followed the golden baby-head, as, happy in the possession of a glowing flower, John Steele was carried out. Steele struck while the iron was hot. Even

as the door shut he introduced the subject he had at heart.

“Before we join the ladies,” he said, “one parting glass. ‘Women and wine,’ says the carpet-knight. ‘Wine and women,’ says the man. And, by the bye, speaking of manhood, what Titanic weights ambition lays on a man’s shoulders nowadays. Mine are absolutely over-burdened. My last straw has been—ahem!—the Sierraville lands.”

“Ah!” murmured the cautious Solomon. He had set down his refilled glass untasted, and was looking at his host with suddenly suspicious eyes.

Steele went on recklessly.

“I did not intend to introduce business here,” he said; “but perhaps we had better take advantage of this opportunity to settle the matter. I will speak to you frankly, as friend to friend. I confess that I know you must have the lands. I invested with the intention of holding them till you should make it worth my while to let them go, but I did not foresee the present panic. They are too heavy for me to carry through the hard times. I must lighten my load, or sink under it. Of course you will take the lands. I will lower the figure in consideration of the accommodation. Two hundred thousand down, and——”

Solomon interrupted him.

“But we are no longer in need of them,” he said. “Learning that they had passed into somewhat extortionate hands, we branched off the road just below them, and crossed Mason’s ranch, on their left, which we obtained at a comparatively reasonable figure.”

“What!” cried Steele, after an instant of dazed silence, “you have betrayed me; you, who indirectly spurred me

on to buy them ! You have schemed to outwit and ruin me—you ! You are mad ! Needing the lands or not, you shall take them now, and at my own figure, too, by heaven ! Do you think that that little affair of the last campaign bribery——”

Again Solomon interrupted him.

“I warned you once before,” he said, “that your manipulation of the screw was too pitiless. You make the retaliation screw a necessity. I may as well tell you frankly, since you force me to the point of defence, that—Rundell and I are one !”

“Rundell—and—you ?”

He had risen from his chair, but he sunk back dizzily. The room whirled; the lights dazzled, blinded him. With a groan he lifted to his lips, with shaking hand, the glass of brandy that Solomon had pushed toward him.

“Drink !” said Solomon, not unkindly. In spite of his natural resentment, he liked the man, and was not unwilling to help him out of a difficulty which he saw must be serious. Moreover, the amiable relationship which such help must establish between him and the young banker was not undesirable in Solomon’s eyes. He had felt, of late, a lack of the enterprise and daring of his opponents—the need of young blood of just such ilk as was surging through the veins of this handsome young scapegrace.

“Come, come !” he said, cheerfully. “Don’t give way. The lands aside, if you are in a tight place we may be able to do something for you.”

He lifted the long-stemmed glass to his lips, and drained its royal draught to the last drop. Its warmth was in his voice as he spoke.

“I say plainly, that we will do something for you,”

he said. "I—I like you! Now, let us join the ladies. You can take the run to Denver with me to-morrow, and we will settle the matter on the way."

Steele followed him mechanically. He was still dazed by his disappointment. In the ante-room, Solomon halted. In statuesque pose by the fountain's brink, fair and stately as the swan at her feet, stood Althea. The perfect line of her throat and shoulders was unbroken by gem or ornament. One bare arm, perfect in tint and symmetry, was extended; her white fingers idly toyed with the perfumed spray. Her breast, from its velvet corsage, swelled like life-thrilled marble. The gold-mine president was bending over her with kindled eyes. Over her white shoulder she smiled at the intruders.

"Mrs. Harriman is in the drawing-room," she said.

Solomon was not a man of stupidities. He passed on.

As they were about to cross the threshold of the drawing-room, the sound of a man's impassioned voice arrested them. Isolde had risen from her chair, over the back of which Rundell was leaning, and pointed to the door.

"You have insulted me!" she said in a low yet imperious voice. "Go! While I am mistress of this house, you shall never cross its threshold again."

Rundell laughed sneeringly, though his lips were white.

"Ha, ha! Quite a realistic assumption of the virtuous rôle," he said. "But do you think I don't know you? What are you but a decoy, a financial lobbyist, different from others in only that your price is higher? Do you suppose there is one of us who does not know why you are here, night after night, tricked out in your devilish gewgaws? *I* insult you! You have given me the right to insult you, as you have given it to each and every man for whom you are used as a decoy!"

In a trice Steele had him by the throat.

“Liar! coward! brute!” he raged. “Retract your damned lies—retract them—retract them——”

Released from his powerful grasp, the man staggered back, gasping for breath. His face was livid with fury. Between his lips oozed the foam of mad animal rage.

“I will have my revenge!” he panted.

“Damn your revenge!” thundered Steele, seizing him by the shoulder and shaking him as if he were a feather-weight. “Down on your knees, I say! Down on your knees!”

There was the sound of approaching footsteps. Steele’s hand relaxed.

“Go!” he said, in a smothered voice. “Your apology shall be made, later.”

Solomon stepped forward.

“I warned you that we were one, Harriman,” he said. “If Rundell goes, I go with him. You know the cost!”

“Go!” he hissed, through teeth clenched tightly behind paling lips. The portières fell behind them. For a moment he stood, staring blankly before him; then, with a groan, he staggered to a seat, his face hid in his hands.

The cost? Aye, he knew it, he knew it!—Ruin! Ruin! Ruin!

Isolde sunk on her knees beside him.

“His attentions to Althea were only a cloak,” she whispered, between her nervous sobs. “It was he who wrote that dreadful letter about Magdalen. He wished me to think the man—you!”

“I am the man,” he cried, despairingly. “Kingsley shouldered it, for your sake. I have been a bad man, a bad man. And the wages of sin are on me.”

She had struggled to her feet, and was swaying to and

fro, saved from falling only by her unconscious grasp of his chair.

“ You ? ” she moaned. “ You ? ”

“ I ! Nor is this all. Rundell’s revenge—shall I tell you what it will be ? It will be the public vindication of Freshet Sal as my brother’s legal wife, the mother of my brother’s legitimate child. He has the marriage certificate in his possession. Dishonor, ruin, stare me in the face ! ”

He expected her to spurn him, to shrink, flee from him. Even yet he did not know her woman-heart. After her first involuntary shuddering recoil, as the horror of his sin dawned upon her, she was conscious only of her soul’s infinite pity for him—of her yearning impulse to stand between him and the doom his sin entailed.

“ From the wages of your sin,” she prayed, unconsciously echoing his words, “ Oh, my husband, God spare you, God spare you ! ”

Over the viol’s song, over the harp’s soft strain and the purl of perfumed waters, his answer shuddered. With set white face, and eyes that looked past the lights and flowers into the darkness of death, and the eternal life beyond it—he spoke it.

“ *The wages of sin is death !* ”

CHAPTER XXX.

RUNDELL'S REVENGE.

The day that followed was Sunday. At the first glimmer of day-break Steele rose from his sleepless bed and walked down to the bank. The watchman had just opened the private door, situated in the rear of the bank, and with his unextinguished lantern still swinging from his hand, was standing on the threshold, drawing in deep sibilant breaths of the balmy morning air. Dismissed to notify the day-watchman that he could take a half-holiday, as business would keep the banker in the building until noon, he went his way with an alacrity born of his eagerness to impart his exciting conviction that "suthin war up wi' th' boss." Steele watched the retreating figure out of sight, dully conscious, in the meantime, of the fresh, cool wind, of the purple haze of day-break, and the twittering of myriad sparrows waking in the budding trees. He sighed as he turned into the bank. The peace of the scene was in bitter contrast to the restless heart within him. He shut and locked the door, saw that the iron shutters were down securely, lest a ray of light shining through a chance chink should betray him, and turned on a couple of the electric jets. Then he opened the safes. He rifled them of books, bonds, bills, coins, their entire contents, which he piled on desks and tables. Then he began his work. For six

long hours he worked on steadily. Then he shut the last book, and dropped his head upon its cover. He was face to face with the fatal truth. Ruin! Ruin! Ruin!

Over and over again he repeated the word. Even yet he scarcely realized its personal application. He ruined—he, Steele Harriman, banker of Newfield, master of the big house, John Harriman's son? Only last night he had stood a king, a god among men; surrounded by fawning courtiers, revelling in royal luxury, foretasting the elysian draught of ambitions, dreams fulfilled! Ruined—he! How had it come about? Where were the thousands, the hundreds of thousands, that had passed through his hands in the last two years? His thoughts followed them to their various graves; to the mines that had swallowed all and returned nothing; to the real estate whose vast values had collapsed like balloons as their air escapes; to the stocks sunk in the market like lead to the sea-bottom; to the mortgages upon whose margins the financial depression of the hour fatally encroached; to the loans whose interest, even, was defaulted; to the bonds now but waste paper, in consequence of the fall of the fickle market! And beyond this vista of misfortune opened the darker one of dishonor! Hypothecated bonds, watered stock, duplicate mortgages—all the piteous futile resources of desperation and despair stared him in the face. Ruin! Ruin! And all for the lack of a little time. A month, perhaps a fortnight hence, the tide would turn, the depressed market rebound. And meantime, his notes must be met; the certain run on the bank withstood—with what? He looked at the bills and gold about him with a bitter sneer. As well none as these. He leaped to his feet with a stifled cry, and pressed both hands to his head. These piles must be increased and multiplied—

they must, they must ! But how, and by whom ? His best resources were drained already ; and a general charriness about accommodating him had been noticeable of late. A suspicion of his difficulties was already abroad. Moreover, others were embarrassed as well as he. Many of whom he had thought to ask a temporary accommodation had asked it of him instead. Solomon had been his main, his last hope, and he had failed him. Who was left ?

After an hour's despairing thought he dashed off a few cipher telegrams, and telephoned to his home for a servant. Him he sent with the despatches, ordering him to wait in the office until all the replies were in. The man looked at him reproachfully—it was his half-holiday—but something in the white set face of the banker forbade remonstrance. As the servant went, and the door was re-locked upon him, the lonely occupant of the great building set about obliterating all traces of his visit. He replaced the books and bonds in the exact order in which he had found them, restored to the safes their precious contents, and fastened the massive door of the vault with the lock whose combination was known only to him and his cashier. Then he turned out the light, and locked the door of his compartment on the outside. Between it and the private exit was a passage illuminated during bank-hours by electric light. But now, with the lights turned off and the outer door still unopened, it was dark almost to blackness. His feet, sinking in the luxurious carpet with which the floor of the passage was covered, made no sound. The wall, as his hand touched it, felt chill and damp. The atmosphere was close and heavy ; he fancied that it smelled like a vault. With a shudder he groped for the door, and with shaking hands, flung it open. The

surprised face of the day-watchman, just coming to his post, greeted him.

"Spent your morning-off in church, I hope, Hopkins?" he said, with forced pleasantry. The sound of his voice grated upon him. He shut the door behind him with impatient haste, and strode toward home.

He had been out since earliest dawn, and it was now past the noon-hour. Isolde was watching for him with anxious eyes. He passed her without a word, and hastening to his room, locked himself in it. He had tasted nothing since the night before, but the tray-laden servant who knocked at his door was fiercely ordered away, and forbidden to return. Ruin! Ruin! The word rang in his ears, blazed before his eyes, crashed like a hammer through his reeling brain. Ruin, utter, inevitable! unless, unless—O God! when would those answers reach him? He had waited days, months, years!

One! Two! Three! Four! Five! The little time-piece on the mantel chimed out the long, slow hours. How the awful day dragged! Each silvery tick was a slow stab through his shrinking, shuddering heart! Pacing from door to window, from window to door, with heavy tread and hands clenched tightly behind him, the suspense was endurable; but forced by sheer physical fatigue to pause and rest, his unstrung nerves gained the mastery. There was a deafening surge in his ears, a blur before his eyes, a maddening throb, an anguished compressed contraction in his brain. Iron bands were binding it, a red-hot iron was piercing it through and through. A sky of fire burned above him, a gulf of fire burned below; the flames curled down, the flames wreathed up, surrounding, scorching, devouring him! "Ruin! Ruin!" hissed a thousand fiery tongues. Again and again he

sprung to his feet with a shuddering cry, forcing his heavy eyes open, his exhausted limbs into renewed motion. Any pain, any agony, were those visions of infernal fire but kept at bay.

The dreary day darkened to dusk. He lifted the window and leaned out, his wild eyes piercing the deepening shadows. The replies upon which his doom depended—would they ever come? The cool night-air, moist with dew, blew gratefully on his fevered face. It softened his mood, broke his tense self-control, as a gentle word sometimes pierces the lethargy of a great grief. He gasped for breath with parted lips and hands pressed convulsively against his anguished breast. Then a sound arose, strong, deep, terrible—the sound of a man's despairing sob. His racked brow dropped to the hard sill. Ruin! Ruin! O God!

The sound of approaching footsteps roused him. He started up and looked out eagerly. A cry escaped him as he descried the messenger, a packet of yellow envelopes in his hand. In a hoarse voice he called to the man to throw them to him. He caught them in shaking hands and tore them open with his teeth, like a greedy animal. Then he leaned from the window and read them by the light of the lawn-lamps.

One by one he read, and re-read them, and flung them to the floor. Then he stamped upon them, grinding his teeth and uttering horrible oaths as he ground them under his heel. Suddenly he laughed, a fierce wild laugh, that died in a sharp sob. Suspense was ended. He had nothing left to hope, nothing to strive for. He had only to sit with folded hands and wait—for what? The awful question went unanswered. Something snapped in his brain—or was it his heart? The iron-bands were loos-

ened. The room slipped from him. He was falling—falling. With an exhausted sigh he sunk into a chair. The flames no longer tortured him ; he was engulfed in chill and darkness. The wind blew in through the open window, rustling the yellow shreds upon the floor. They were the ashes of his last hope, but he did not heed them. Merciful unconsciousness had come to his relief.

It was nearly midnight when Isolde, startled by the unbroken silence, knocked resolutely upon his door. Twice through the day she had begged admittance and been repulsed ; but now she was resolved to take no denial. He woke from his lethargy with a start, and as the knock was repeated, listened. Over her gentle voice he caught a sound welcome to him in his feverish thirst and faintness—the tinkle of ice against glass. With an effort he rose and opened the door. Isolde was alone, staggering under the weight of a heavy tray. A siphon of seltzer stood upon it, and a bowl of crushed ice. He seized both, and pouring the seltzer over the ice, drank from the bowl greedily. Then, deaf to her entreaty, he locked the door against her. She turned away with tearful eyes, but with a lightened heart. At least, he was alive, and—sober. She had feared—she scarcely knew what—in those long, dread hours of silence. Covering the tray with a napkin, she left it by the door, in case he should wish refreshment during the night. Then she crept wearily upstairs, to lie beside her baby, with sleepless anxious eyes.

Breakfast, the next morning, was a silent meal. John Harriman had long since partaken of his simple dish, and was smoking in the grounds. He had not the slightest suspicion of his son's difficulties. His seclusion of the day before had seemed to the old man the natural sequel of the preceding night's entertainment, and Isolde had not

dispelled his happy illusion. To her relief and surprise, Steele ate heartily. His magnificent physique, with its virile recuperative powers, was asserting itself. The despair of the night before had been a weak delirium, from which he awoke to strength, if not to hope. As the clock climed the hour of nine, he rose from the table. Isolde followed him into the hall. The nurse was just descending the stairs, the baby in her arms. Isolde took him from her, and the girl passed on. Then she held him toward her husband.

“Kiss him,” she said, softly.

She felt a tender hope, poor young mother, that the memory of the innocent, childish face would remain with him, and strengthen him for whatever conflict the day might bring. The revelations of the night of the dinner had well-nigh broken her gentle heart, but she had put aside all thought of self, knowing, instinctively, that her husband was in dire need of all her love and tenderness. She yearned to go to Sal ; she yearned to go to Magdalen ; she yearned with the weary pain of hopeless impotence, to right the wrongs of both. Upon the wrong done her, she did not suffer her thoughts to dwell. She was no longer the passionate girl who had fled from her home into the bitter night, because the mantle of vice had dared to brush against her ; but the conscientious, patient, resigned woman, facing her wrongs, not fleeing them, steadfastly following the way of the Master, Who, with bleeding feet, first trod the Via Crucis of the Christian life. Not but that she resolved one wrong should end, and one be righted. She had thought out both termination and reparation in the sleepless hours of the previous night, while her baby, hers and his, dreamed its heaven-born dreams beside her. But these resolves

were born of duty, not of resentment. Personal resentment, indeed, she no longer felt. Pain and pity for the mortal guilt of the man she loved, absorbed her.

As he drew on his coat the bell pealed noisily. He opened the door, and was confronted by the anxious face of his cashier.

“I came to warn you that there is a run on the bank,” he said.

The banker reeled against the door.

“Already?” he gasped.

“Rundell is at the bottom of it,” the cashier explained. “He stayed over Sunday at the hotel, and started the rumor that we are dependent upon the Denver Bank, which suspends payment this morning. The run looks serious. I did not wish to act without your orders.”

“We will walk to the bank together,” he said. Then he turned back to Isolde.

“Order the carriage at once,” he said, “and ask father to drive you to the ranch. Remain there until I send for you.”

“Steele,” she cried, imploringly.

At the cry, he looked back. She stood in the morning sunlight, leaning toward him with awed white face and pleading eyes, her baby in her arms.

Turning back, he caught her to him in a wordless, close embrace; then without one backward glance, he left her.

In that mute kiss, though they knew it not, their lips had bidden to love and to each other a last, eternal farewell.

CHAPTER XXXI.

“THE WAGES OF SIN IS ——”

At the private entrance to the bank his father met him, pointing with trembling hand to the crowd clamoring at the public door.

“I’ve spoke ter ‘em, but ‘tain’t made no differ’,” he quavered. “They say as how words is all very well, but money’s better’r. I axed ‘em ef they’d ever wanted fnr money as John Harriman owed ‘em, an’ they said ‘twarn’t wi’ John Harriman they’re dealin’ now, but wi’ John Harriman’s son. Wot’s getten inter ‘em ter talk that there way, Steele? Wot’s gone wrong atwixt ye?”

“Nothing,” answered Steele, forcing a smile as he spoke. “The run is the result of a senseless scare, started by an enemy. I will pay them off as they come, and by night they will be ashamed of themselves. The rumor has reached the house, and Isolde is nervous. I want you to drive her to the ranch, father. You can do nothing for me here.”

The old man hesitated. “I can’t leave ye ter face yer trouble single-handed,” he said.

Steele feigned a laugh. “My trouble, father? Why, this is a joke—absolutely a joke! You will see them shambling back humbly enough to-morrow. Go, for my sake; and whatever rumors reach you, do not believe them. If anything serious turns up, I will send for you.”

The old man's face was averted, but a glistening drop trickling slowly down his cheek betrayed him.

"Why, father," exclaimed his son, "I do believe that you are crying, like a woman!"

The grand old face was radiant behind its tears, like the sun behind a shower.

"I was thankin' God fur givin' me sech a good son, sech a true son!" he sobbed. "I was thinkin' how it might o' b'en ef all this warn't a joke; ef—ef 'twar in 'arnest, an'—an' ye'd desarv'd it!"

He turned away, with a hearty pressure of his son's hand, and a whispered "God bless ye!" Steele's defiant eyes, as they followed the aged figure, softened with sudden tears.

"Poor old father!" he murmured. "If—if anything should happen to me——"

He pulled a flask from his pocket and took a deep draught from it; then, with a bracing gesture of his strong young shoulders, he entered upon the day's work.

Kingsley arrived during the forenoon—his first appearance in Newfield since Isolde had disdainfully dismissed him from the Harriman breakfast-room. Steele greeted him surlily. Surliness was the mask with which he hid his shame. He had reason to be ashamed in Kingsley's presence, more reason than, as yet, even Kingsley knew. Unknown to Newfield, which supposed the bank to be Steele Harriman's private venture, Kingsley, for the last nine months, had been the banker's "silent partner." From the first he had known the partnership to be a reckless speculation—to-day he learned that it had been a ruinous one. Not only was his capital lost, but he was legally bound to share the banker's liabilities, should the bank fail—which ominous possibility seemed suddenly

imminent. Moreover, should the real culprit turn deserter—and Kingsley could not but realize that should the worst come to worst, nothing but flight could save Steele—the entire responsibility would devolve upon him. He left for Denver at noon, with a pale face and eyes that foresaw trouble. But his parting word to Steele was a kind one.

“Do the best you can for yourself,” he said. “I have no wife to suffer with me.”

At two o’clock there was a knock at the private door. As it opened, Steele started back with an amazed exclamation. His visitor was a woman.

With a word of apology to the crowd pressed about it, he drew down his window, and motioned his cashier to shut the door connecting their apartments. When this was done, the two were virtually alone.

“Magdalen!” he said, then.

In silence she lifted the heavy veil that concealed her face. Then unlocking, with a key hanging from her watch-guard, a satchel secured by a strap that crossed her shoulder, she took from it a bulky package of bank-notes, and laid it on his desk.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence. Then the man’s eyes fell.

“Five thousand dollars,” she said, in a bitter voice; “the balance of the sum placed to my credit six months ago. I wish to God that I could return the full sum. I wish to God that we had never met!”

She had bowed her head and was leaning upon his desk, shaken from head to foot with tearless sobs. Something in the despairing attitude of the regal figure touched him. In her presence, incongruous as it may seem, he was seldom at his worst.

"I am sorry, Magdalen," he said, helplessly.

She lifted her face and raised her beautiful eyes to him.

"Before I met you," she said, "my life was a clean page. No man had written dishonor or shame upon it. Kingsley—Kingsley——"

"Yes, I know," he said. "Kingsley would have married you. You—you owe me no kindness, Magdalen. Keep your money. I cannot accept it."

"You must accept it," she said, firmly. "It is the least—the last—honor you can do me. I am going out of your life forever. Good-by."

Over the soft carpet her light footfalls made no sound. The outer door opened and shut. She was gone.

With nervous hands he caught up the bank-notes and counted them rapidly. Five thousand dollars! Not a drop in the bucket, should the worst come to the worst; but a faint hope was springing up in the man's heart, that the worst might be averted. The prompt and unquestioning payment which had been made all day had restored general confidence. There were no more outspoken suspicions nor muttered threats. At the first stroke of the hour which was the usual signal for closing, Steele shut the books. The men about his window fell back with shamed faces as his contemptuous eyes challenged them.

"You have seen enough to-day," he said, in a ringing voice that echoed through the bank, "to prove the utter falseness of your suspicions. I did not tell you that you were fools, because I chose to let you discover that fact for yourselves. Resume your run to-morrow, and your accounts, to the last one, shall be closed. The Harriman Bank is dissolved. I will not

accept the restored trust of the men who have once dis-trusted me."

Without a word the men slunk out. The crowd jeered them.

"Steele Harriman's tongue-lashin's turned ye inter whipped curs, wi' yer tails atween yer legs," cried a mocking voice. "Wot's he b'en a-sayin' of?"

"He sez ez how we've made fools o' ousrel's," responded one of the tongue-lashed. "I sez ez how we've made darned fools of ourselves."

This sentiment proved contagious, and the crowd, its confidence in bank and bankers alike restored, began to disperse. As the bank door closed upon the last apologetic figure, the banker turned to his cashiers.

"Put up the books, boys," he said. "You have had a hard day. I will see to the safes before Billy comes to lock up. Go out the front way, through the crowd, and say that I have already left by the rear. They will hang about if they suspect that I am still in the bank."

The young men obeyed with alacrity. The groups still lounging before the bank closed about them with eager questions. Taking advantage of the moment, Steele opened the private door. As he had expected, Ladybird was already there. A quick glance about him showed him that he was unobserved.

"Bring the mare in here! Quick, lad!" he whispered. The boy stared at him stupidly.

"Bring—th'—mare—in?" he repeated, incredulously. "In, you fool, in!" he cried.

The mare, obeying his voice and gesture, followed him with a low whinny. The boy gawked at her with open mouth, as she stepped lightly over the threshold onto the velvet carpet.

"I'm dumm'd ef th' boss ain't gone crazy ez a branded bull," he ruminated, scratching his head through a hole in his ragged cap. "A hoss onter theer kyarpet! Red Injuns!"

He followed the mare in dazed fashion. Steele shut and locked the door after him.

"Let down the blinds, as usual," he said, "and don't gape like a blasted idiot. If they saw the mare they would wait for me, and I am not in the mood to bandy words with the fools. Now, do you understand?"

Billy shuffled toward the window, relieved, but not convinced. "A hoss onter theer kyarpet" was too much for him, explanations notwithstanding. The loungers without, catching sight of his staring eyes, thought that their presence awed him, and mischievously proceeded to intimidate him with deadly threats and belligerent gestures, the evident effect of which they greeted with howls of glee. One man threw a small stone against one of the windows, but was promptly hustled out of temptation's way by his companions. They had nothing against the bank now; not they! It was dealing squarely by them, and they would deal squarely by it. No weather-vane is more veering than the temper of a mob.

When the last shutter was down, and the last bolt slipped into its place, Billy departed, still scratching his head over the problem of "a hoss onter theer kyarpet." At last the banker was alone. With his head bowed on his desk, he sat, thinking, thinking. The run on the bank no longer troubled him. The worst was over, and he was not unhopeful that he could satisfy the demands of such few depositors as might yet choose to close their accounts; but the bank, alas, was the least of his responsibilities! In his reckless financial ambition he had vent-

ured far outside of his legitimate field, and it was beyond its borders that ruin threatened him. How was he to avert it? Absorbed in the thought, he was unconsciously fingering the notes Magdalen had left, and which he had not yet locked away, when the sound of a sudden tumult outside roused him from his reverie. He drew on his light overcoat, and cramming the notes into its inner pocket, crouched against the iron shutter of the bank-door, and listened.

"Th' Denver bank's shet down ter-day," cried a strident voice, "w'ich means ez th' Newfield bank 'll shet down ter-morrer. Steele Harriman's kep' dark, but th' Denver Bank war his'n. Th' Denver *News'* extry sez so!"

There was a groan from the crowd.

The voice resumed: "Th' banks ain't all th' extry's got inter it, not by a darned deal! Thar's wusser comin'. Th' Weste'n Land Comp'ny's gone kersmash, an' ye all know wot thet that means—th' little lots ez we've slaved ter hold an' pay fur 's gone wi' it."

Cries and oaths responded. Above them sounded a woman's hysterical sob.

"An' now, chaps"—the speaker had mounted the bank-steps, and only the iron door divided him from the desperate, despairing listener crouching on the bank floor—"an' now, chaps, ye've heerd th' extry, an' now hear me! I'm a plain man, an' a hard-workin' man, an' my woman hain't hed no silks nor di'mants, nor my gals don't play th' pyanner, nor set down fer help ter wait on. But plain livin' fur plain folks 's my motto, an' I've stood up ag'in' ye fur Steele Harriman, thro' likin' th' chap, an' his father afore him, an' holdin' ez twarn't no affair o' mine how he spent his own pile, so's he stood by mine. But he hain't stood by mine, nor he hain't stood by yern, chaps! He's fool'd us fro' th' fust-off start. He's robb'd us right an'

left, an' we hain't hed th' git-up ter see it. Th' Land Comp'ny's a sell—th' extry sez so!—an' wot's fur an' away wuss fur me an' more liker me, th' Mine Comp'ny's a sell! This 'yer run onter th' bank's got wind, an' th' truth's come out ter last. Thar's wirin's fro' far an' near, an' theer all ag'in' us. Th' Mine Comp'nies's wi'out a mine atwixt 'em. Thar war deep enough pockets ter theer trousers, but nary a one ter theer mines. We've gotten our shar's—honest paper—these 'yer's mine. Ain't them purty things, now, fur ter pay over five years' savin's fur? Th' Open-Mouth Mine, it sez onter 'em. Wal, now, thar ain't no Open-Mouth Mine. Thar ain't a pick nor a pan in th' hull diggin's. Steele Harriman's play'd a bluff game, an' he's beat us, ev'ry time!"

There was a sullen roar of anger from the crowd, followed by a dull sound, as it surged against doors and windows. But the banker did not hear it. As the man spoke, he had dashed to the private door, backed Ladybird out, her light hoofs passing noiselessly from carpet to soil, and stealthily crossing the open field at the rear of the bank, had given the mare her head, and was dashing madly along toward the Junction tracks.

But the distance was not half compassed when a faint sound from behind struck on his ear. He pulled up Ladybird and listened. Were they already on his track? An instant later the fear became a certainty. They had discovered his flight, and were already in pursuit of him.

He dashed ahead at desperate speed, mentally weighing, meantime, his chances of escape. He would back his mare against all the mustangs behind her, but to outrace them now was nothing. The express was not due for an hour, and unless he could throw them off the scent the delay would be fatal to him. But if not toward the Junction, where

should he ride? The fierce curses rushing to his lips seemed to choke him. His breath came in strangling, sob-like gasps. The air, as it hissed past him, caught up his despairing question. "Where?" it reiterated, before, around, behiud him. "Where? Where? Where?"

In his irresolution he had held in the mare, unconsciously slackening her pace. Of a sudden he realized that his pursuers had gained upon him. With a stifled cry, he dashed from the road into a narrow footpath closely overgrown with shrub and brush, which seemed to lose itself a few rods ahead in a dense pine thicket. He halted in its shadow, crouching in the saddle with panting breath, and watched with wild, fierce eyes as his pursuers sped by, shouting and swearing, and urging on their galloping horses with whip and spur.

As the last one galloped out of sight, he turned Ladybird's head, and spoke a low word to her. With an intelligent whinny she sprung through the pine-thicket. The narrow path, long untrodden by man or beast, was almost impassable, even on foot. For a horseman it was wellnigh impenetrable, yet the brave mare stumbled on. His pursuers would, he knew, press straight on from the big house to the Ledge, and thence to the Junction. By this short cut, if Ladybird could make it, he would gain a clear half-hour upon them. As the mare strained on, his brain began to reel, his reason was almost unseated. A rushing sound, ever increasing in violence, surged shudderingly about him. It bewildered, terrified him. Was it the warning of his prophetic soul, crying out that judgment had overtaken him? Was it the shriek of demon-voices, as the gates of hell flamed open for him?

No, it was only the ominous voice of the swollen Freshet—the roar of its waters, rising, rising!

CHAPTER XXXII.

————— DEATH ! ”

He was dashing past the Freshet cabin toward the Junction, when his mare reared suddenly, her mad pace arrested by Sal's strong hand on her bridle.

“They're ter th' Ledge a'ready, an' they'll spot yo' fro' th' winders,” she panted. “Foot it acrost th' marsh-way ter th' Junction, an' yo'll jest about ketch th' flyer. Don't fool wi' your last show.”

She darted into the cabin with an imperious call for him to follow. He threw the reins on Ladybird's neck and dismounted, obeying her in a dazed way, yet with a gleam of hope dawning upon the lethargy of his despair.

As he stepped across the threshold, however, a dread sound reached him—the sound of shouts which the wind brought from the Ledge. “It's too late!” he said; “I'm done for, Sal ! ”

He tapped his breast-pocket significantly.

“This—or the Freshet ? ” he asked. “Which shall it be ? ”

She struck down his hand with a contemptuous gesture.

“Your coat, quick ! ” she cried.

Before he realized her intention she had torn his light coat from his shoulders, and drawn it over her woman's garb. On the table lay a gray sombrero, similar in tint and shape to one he often wore—a style common

to both men and women in wilder parts of the West. This she put on, pushing it well back till its brim concealed her hair.

"I've a ride fur life afore me," she panted ; "a ride fur your life. I'm riskin' mine, not fur yo', but fur her ez stood by me! I've writ down onter this 'yer paper ez Waif's her'n, ef aught goes wrong wi' me. Pin it onter her skirt fur me. I—I can't do it."

She caught the wondering child from the hammock, and clasped her in a clinging, passionately fond embrace. An instant later she had crossed the road, and was vaulting, man-fashion, into Ladybird's saddle.

He followed her with set white face. The last instinct of honest manhood surviving in him—the instinct which, at the cost of his own ruin, had impelled him to avenge the insult offered his wife now impelled him to tell this woman the truth, though his life was in her hands.

"Sal," he said, "I cannot go until I tell you the truth. Jack was never married to Rose Rundell. You are his legal wife, Waif his legitimate child. Isolde knows the truth. She will see you righted."

She heard him almost incredulously. All her shame, all her loneliness, all the torture of her outcast life and evil fame, all the wrong and pathos of her innocent child's brief life, the fruit of this man's lie ! And she was risking her life, the desertion of her friendless, helpless child, for him. She made an attempt to dismount, but her strength failed her. With both hands she clutched her strangling throat.

The hoofs sounded nearer. They were speeding round the angle of the Ledge cross-roads. Through a cloud of dust the heads of the leaders were just discernible.

With a sob that was almost a cry, she bent, and with fierce hands pushed him from her toward the cabin.

“God forgive yo’,” she sobbed, “an’ save yo’—fur her sake !”

Then, as the cabin-door swung behind him, she rode Ladybird into the middle of the road, and waited.

For a moment there was silence ; then a hoarse shout rang from the foremost of the pursuers, announcing that Ladybird was recognized. She waited an instant longer, that the well-known mare and familiar gray coat and sombrero might be fully identified, and then, giving Ladybird her head, she was off—off on the heroic ride that risked her life for the man who had ruthlessly blasted it.

Two miles ! three miles ! five miles ! Ladybird caught the spirit of the hour, and led the mob a gallant chase. The wind hissed by ; the mountains, the pines, the bushes sped past on lightning wings. The twilight deepened to darkness, relieved by the flickering sparks of the igniting stars. The pursuers, desperate lest their prey escape them under cover of the shadows, sunk spurs deeper and deeper into their horses’ shuddering flanks, uttering cries of triumph as a spurt of speed brought the bay and its intrepid rider at last within their range. A score of hands lifted simultaneously ; a score of shots rang sharply over the silent night. There was a moment of breathless suspense as the smoke cleared away, then a wild cheer rose from the crowd. The noble mare was down, riddled with cruel bullets ; and prostrate beside her lay her rider, motionless, face downward in the dust, a telltale stream of blood oozing from one outstretched arm.

In a trice they were on her, lifting her with brutal hands, which, as they turned her face to the sky, grew suddenly gentle.

“ ‘Tain’t him, by the devil ! ”

“ Good Lord, it’s a woman ! ”

Down the gray sleeve the red blood trickled drop by drop—drop by drop. First in a little pool, then in a tiny stream, it stained the dust. They fell back from the ghastly sight, looking at one another with pale, remorseful faces. With lips white as her own, above her face upturned to the still sky, tenderly, one to another, they whispered her piteous woman-name.

“ Freshet Sal ! ” they faltered. “ Freshet Sal ! ”

The express would be due at the Junction in less than half an hour. The marsh-way was roundabout and hard to travel, owing to the treacherous water-soaked soil. If the fugitive would not lose his last small chance, he must act quickly. As he emerged from the inner room of the cabin in which he had concealed himself till the sound of the hoofs died away, his thoughts reverted to his coat, the pocket of which, in his bewilderment at Sal’s sudden action, he had forgotten to empty. With desperate hands he clutched his pockets, turning them inside out, and emptying their contents on the cabin-floor. Cigar-case, match safe, flask, pistol, watch, knife, handkerchief, cards, letters, stamps, keys—a few loose coins of gold and silver, and his purse ! With trembling hands, he opened it. A hundred dollars in bills, and a couple of gold pieces—these were all. For a moment he despaired ; then hope reasserted itself. Bad as things were, they might have been worse. He could lie in ambush till the money in Sal’s possession should be forwarded to him through faithful Jim ; and then—there were lands to which the extradition-treaty did not extend—lands in which he might begin life anew ; life, with its proud ambitions, its

luring pleasures, its golden goals. Hastily gathering up the scattered articles, he replaced them in his pockets; and then, drawing his hat over his eyes, stepped toward the door. Half a pace from it he paused. What was it—that sudden dreadful sound thundering from the distance toward him—that sudden, awful sensation as the cabin stirred and trembled like a human creature in fear? What was it—what was it?

There was a startled cry from Waif, and then tense silence, as both man and child listened in spell-bound terror. For a moment the sound was dully deafening, but gradually it subsided, only a subdued surge and gurgle remaining. The cabin seemed to steady itself, but its walls still vibrated with the regular, smothered thuds of some opposing outer force. At the same time there came through the window opening on the Freshet a blinding shower of spray. As it dashed in Steele's face, he understood. To shut the window and drop its inner shutter was the work of but an instant. Then he sprung to the door. A foamy tide swept in as he opened it, eddying like a miniature whirlpool about his feet. He pressed forward defiantly. In an instant he was up to his waist in water, and almost swept off his feet. Stepping to one side, that the cabin-light might shine through the door, he peered with wild eyes into the falling darkness. Before him, to right and left of him, there was nothing but rushing water. The dyke had broken, and the swollen Arkansas was flooding its fork. The Freshet hemmed him in.

He staggered back into the cabin, with difficulty shutting the door in the face of the rising water. Then he pushed the table against it. He recollects now, that for some days there had been grave fears of the Freshet; that Isolde had begged him, only two days before, to force

Sal into safer quarters, and that a party of commissioners and workmen had ridden out that morning to examine and strengthen the dyke. Little by little the old story of the fatal freshet, the horror-tale of his childhood, came back to him. He recalled how, more than thirty years before, a horseman had galloped at midnight over the ground now known as the Freshet cross-roads, and dismounted a few rods further on, to tighten a girth ; how he had been surprised by a sudden thunder-like boom, distant at first, but reverberating nearer and nearer, then by a rushing, gurgling sound behind him, and had looked back to behold the tract over which he had galloped five minutes before, a swirling expanse of water ; how for three days and nights the waters had surged there, leaving behind them, to tell of the ill-fated settlement, only a few spars from the cabin-wrecks. He saw the tents and cabins drifting out, saw the men struggling in the rushing waters, heard their despairing shrieks as the dark tide sucked them down forever. He shuddered convulsively. Cold drops of agony stood on his forehead. Suddenly, he started up with an appealing cry. The gurgle about the cabin had been succeeded by a series of sullen booms accompanied by steady shocks, under which the cabin creaked and trembled ominously ; and now, from under the door, even to his feet, flowed a deepening stream of foam-flecked water. In the back of the cabin a stationary ladder led to a loft opening upon the roof. With a bound he scaled it. The last ray of light had vanished. Reaching the slanting roof, the darkness of death engulfed him ; the dark skies lowered above him ; the dark night encompassed him ; the dark waters swelled beneath him. As they surged up toward him, a terrible cry rang from his shuddering lips.

“Help! Help! The boat! The boat! Help!”

He forgot the pursuers he had eluded, the capture he was inviting, the danger he had not yet escaped—forgot everything save those yawning, black-depted waters, straining hungrily toward the cabin-roof.

Driving leisurely from the prairie into the Ledge road, a man heard the wild cry and answered it. The answer was only the faintest note echoing from the distance, but Steele caught it. He lowered himself into the cabin and snatched the lamp from the table. The lighter furniture was already swimming about the room; a moment later, and the lamp must have yielded its precious flame to its elemental enemy. As he was turning back to the ladder, the sound of Waif’s frightened sob reached him. With a sensation of relief at the proximity of a fellow human creature, he folded his disengaged arm about her, and mounted with her to the roof, waving the lamp above his head as he cried again for help. The responsive voice, though nearer than before, sounded hopelessly distant to the man toward whom the fatal waves rose swiftly. A mad desire possessed him to leap into them, to breast, to defy, to conquer them. As he hesitated, there was a crash beneath him. A portion of the cabin-wall facing on the Freshet had been forced in, and through the aperture the little centre-table drifted. He watched it breathlessly. If it floated on the waters he could breast them. If it sunk—but the doubt was already solved. For a moment it trembled, strained, resisted; then, with an angry murmur the waters caught it, whirling it dizzily about, in ever-narrowing circles, until the undercurrent seized it and bore it resistlessly outward toward the all-devouring falls. He watched it till the last ripple that marked its grave in the dark waters vanished; then, with a fierce im-

precation, he hurled the lamp after it into the swirling tide. Waif, startled by the sudden darkness, began to sob in his arms. For one wild moment he threatened to cast her, too, into the seething waters, but of a sudden his fierce face softened. He soothed her gently, rocking her to and fro in his arms, till her sobs were quieted. Then he folded her closer to him, clasping her little arms about his neck, pressing her soft child-cheek against his own.

“Go to sleep, little Waif,” his pale lips murmured. “Go to sleep.”

“Ant to pway my pwayer,” she sobbed. “Now I ‘ay me !” Pway it !”

Pray it ? He ? How many a year since he had prayed at all—how many and many an one since that simple prayer of his innocent childhood had passed his impious lips.

“Pway it !” insisted Waif.

On a sudden surge of memory, the words came back to him.

“Now I lay me,” he began, almost unconsciously.

“Now I ‘ay me,” she repeated.

“Down to sleep,”

“Down to s’leep”—

“I pray the Lord,”

“I pway de ‘Ord”—

“My soul to keep,”

“My soul to teep”—

“And if I die,”

“An’ if I die”—

“Before I wake,”

“Afo’ I wate”—

“I pray the Lord,”

“I pway de ‘Ord”—

“My soul to take,”

“My soul to tate !”

With a convulsive sob he pressed his lips to hers. He had said a prayer—he ! The merciful lethargy of despair was broken. Thoughts flashed through his brain like flames from a fierce fire. Thoughts not of the present, but of the past, and of the future the past foreshadows.

Who shall follow them as they sped backward, backward, over the sinful life whose every incident flashed before him with the awful clearness that is the premonitory revelation of the great revealer, Death ! He saw himself again a boy, a handsome, manly, proud little fellow, going his riotous way side by side with wild, reckless, rollicking Jack—golden-haired, blue-eyed, light-hearted Jack, who had been every man’s friend and no man’s enemy, save his own. He saw himself once more a youth—a tall, broad-shouldered, masterful young fellow, treading his native soil like a prince and monarch. How proud his father had been of him—how cordially the town-folk had hailed him—what an imperious, triumphant life he had led, his masculine beauty the admiration of every eye, his splendid prowess the envy of every arm, his brilliant promise the theme of every tongue ! Then the phases of early manhood passed before him—the phase of mental pride and spiritual struggle ; the phase of doubt, dispelled by divine conviction, against which he had revolted because it armed his spirit against his human flesh. Day by day, night by night, scene by scene, that fateful phase was re-lived. Again he drank of the draught of sin whose stain had sullied the virginal lips of his soul forever ; again shuddered from its bitter lees ; again renewed the resolves, the dreams, the hopes, the aspirations of his regenerated spirit. But the regenerative phase had

been but brief, slain in the very moment in which his guilty concealment of Sal's honest wifehood had been conceived. Waif's tiny form seemed a leaden weight, her clinging arms to strangle him as he thought of it. He turned from the memory with a shudder, and fixed his thoughts on Isolde—on Isolde, the dreamful, sweet, pure-hearted girl ; on Isolde, the fluttering, shy, evasive sweet-heart ; on Isolde, the startled, shrinking, yet ah ! how loving bride ; on Isolde, the wife, who, with her faith and love ruthlessly outraged, was faithful, loving still ; on Isolde, the sad-eyed, pure-faced young mother of his child, his son—standing as he had last seen her, with the bright spring sunlight shimmering around her, her baby like a flower on her breast. He had not done well by her, poor Isolde. Ah, by whom in all his life had he done well ! Not by his old father, whose pathetic faith he had failed ; not by Jack, whom he had left to his own wild way ; not by Sal, whose claim on him he had outraged and denied ; not by the helpless child in his arms, in whose veins ran the same blood that coursed within his own—not by these, of his own kin. And what of others—strangers ? Had he done well by Kingsley, whose honor he had risked, whose wealth he had lost, whose love he had blasted ? Had he done well by boyish, weak young Randal, whom he had betrayed to the tempters, cards and women and wine ? Had he done well by beautiful, hapless Magdalen, who had never crossed the chasm save for him ? Had he done well by the poor, hard-working settlers—by the toil-worn women who had trusted him—by anyone who had ever relied on his faith, his truth, his honor ? No, a thousand times no. And the chill, dark waters—the waters of death—tolled about his feet.

Death ! the dreadful word means—what ? The end of life ! the end only ? Or at once an end and a beginning ? An endless, restful, untroubled dream,—a deep, sweet silence,—a long, still torpor,—an eternal sleep,—the pagan “dust to dust ? ” Or, as the Christian, as his own soul told him,—the flight of the creature to his Creator, of the soul to its God, of the sinner to the Tribunal whose justice cannot be blinded, whose judgment is not man’s, whose sentence rings past life, past death, to the eternity beyond them,—eternity in heaven, eternity in hell.

A cry escaped him, a cry of awful terror and despair. Again a voice responded. Did he dream, or rang it no longer from the distant shore, but from the waters near him ? Waif answered his wild question. With a little sigh of content that her prayer was prayed, she had nestled down in his arms, dreamfully watching the waters, which were not fearful, but only wonderful to her, in the unfamiliar phase whose portent she did not know. But now she started suddenly, and, stretching out her arms, gazed into the spray-veiled darkness with rapt, ecstatic eyes.

“ *De boat !* ” she cried,—“ *de boat !* ”

There was no question in the childish mind but that this was the boat for which she had watched and waited—the tide which should bear her up to God’s golden shore ! Her eyes looked past the darkness into a light with which her child-face was illumined. What was the vision of the white child-soul ? What did the child-eyes see, where the man saw but death and hell ? Who can doubt that God’s golden shore was indeed before her—that already her angel was speeding the child-soul to it, folding it for the passage in its glistening white wings !

As the oars splashed nearer, and the boat strained in

sight, through the darkness over the turmoil of the waters a familiar voice sounded.

“Keep yer grip, Freshet Sal !” it quavered. “Dontee be afeared, little gal ! Th’ old boat an’ th’ old man’s ‘yer ter save ye !”

“Father !” sobbed Steele ; “O, father !”

There was an instant’s breathless silence. Then over the waters echoed one ringing, exultant cry.

“My son Steele !” it rang. “O, my son Steele !”

Just beside the cabin swirled the current that eddied to the falls. With all his strength the old man rowed against it. The fretted oars split, the old boat creaked and strained, its rotten timbers cracked and parted. The water oozed slowly in.

With giant strokes he pulled it within reach of the cabin. Then he dropped the oars, and clutching with both hands the jutting eave of the cabin, by main force drew the boat toward it, succeeding, at last, in steadyng it upon the submerged window-sill. Then he looked up with a wan smile on his face.

“Gi’ me th’ little gal,” he panted, “an’ let yersel’ down. Th’ water’s risin’.”

A great swell struck the cabin. It trembled, creaked, and tottered. From the shore came the sound of voices, and lanterns and torches flashed.

Standing in the swaying boat, the old man, clinging to the cabin with one hand, lifted the other toward the roof.

“Now !” he gasped, motioning his son to lower Waif to him.

But Steele did not heed him. With his eyes fixed before him in a terrible stare, with lips white and damp with the dews of his death-agony, he stood, shaking

from head to foot, deaf and blind to his father's wild appeal.

"Steele!" The piteous cry rose shudderingly from the waters. "My son Steele!"

A second and stronger swell struck the cabin, shaking it to its foundations. Little by little the logs were giving way. There was a strangled creak as it wavered and shuddered like a living creature in fear. Then slowly, surely, it tipped toward the yawning waves.

With the strength of despair, the old man drew himself up to the tilting roof, and grasped his son by the arm.

"It's fallin'," he cried. "Th' boat 'll be swamped under it. Fur God's sake—fur 'Soldy's sake—fur my sake——"

The fixed eyes stared ahead. Over the dark waters a frightful phantom flitted, the foam of the angry billows its ghastly shroud. Help! Help! It was his brother Jack—Sal's husband, Waif's father, vengeance flaming in his awful eyes!

"Waif!" he shrieked. "I always meant to do well by you! I have done well by you! Sal and Waif are righted, Jack—Sal and Waif are righted! Keep between us, Waif! Help! He is on me! His scorching eyes—his strangling arms—Waif! Waif!—O God!—"

The old, appealing, despairing human cry! Uttered in faith, in fear, in hope since in piteous petition! Who shall say that even in that late, last moment it rang past Christ's Cross, unheard?

The cry was drowned, even as it was uttered. The cabin, dislodged at last, tipped into the dark waters, which, like a pall, closed over it; then with its human freight, it was sucked into the maelstrom of the flooded falls.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN END, AND A BEGINNING.

Six months later.

The flood had flowed and ebbed, and the Freshet tragedy was already a thing of the past. Where the waves had swirled, the deep tides seethed, again rose banks and meadows green with summer. The site of the Freshet cabin, now bleak and barren, was the single surviving mark of the water's fatal passage. Material evidences, be they of life or death, are but transitory. Only in Isolde's soul, in Sal's sad mother-heart, the flood-mark is eternal.

The triple Harriman tragedy ; Sal's ride, with its well-nigh fatal ending ; the story of her marriage, which Isolde roused herself from her grief to publish and authenticate ; her installation in the Harriman house, in defiance of Althea's open protests and Newfield's silent disapproval—all had been a nine times nine days' wonder to the little town. But with the honorable settlement, through Kingsley, of the banker's financial affairs, the wonder, like the flood at its neap, abated. Upon the death of the banker, the law had stepped in ; only to step out again with polite apologies, however, when Kingsley presented legal proof that as the banker's surviving partner, the liabilities of the bank lawfully devolved upon him ; and in the meantime, happily for Kingsley, the

wave of financial depression, whose tidal passage over the country had submerged the Newfield Bank, turned and ebbed, and finally receded altogether. As the natural reaction set in, and the depressed market rebounded with cork-like lightness, the over-burden which had swamped the Harriman name in life, saved it in death. Seizing the most advantageous moment, Kingsley made a clear sale of all the Newfield banker's stock. The dead paper of two months before sold now at inflated values; and the sum thus realized not only cancelled all honest debts and redeemed all dishonest ones, but likewise included a surplus which served to clear the Harriman home, whose heavy mortgage had been Steele's guilty secret. As to the Land and Mine Companies which the orator of the bank-steps, on the fatal night of the Freshet, had denounced as frauds, Kingsley had not; and proved that he had not, been implicated in them. These had been Steele's private ventures, and though not strictly legitimate ones, resembled the devil in only that they were less black than they had been painted. Suffice it to say that none of the investors lost by them. There were a few who knew, and many who suspected, that the honorable settlement of the Harriman affairs was not due to the dead banker's integrity; but even these, recalling his prompt payments made upon demand up to the hour of his death, faltered in their conviction against him, and as time went on, began to doubt if the young banker had not indeed gone down to a hero's rather than to a traitor's grave. The men who would have been most pitiless to him, living, were the most charitable to him, dead. They forgot the criminal and fugitive, and remembered only the handsome, dashing young banker, the "big house" host, John Harriman's son. In life, there would

have been no dishonor too great to heap upon him, to whom, in death, they granted an honored memory in lieu of an honored grave. Who shall say that the ways of Providence are only mysterious? They are merciful, as well.

The five thousand dollars, found where the banker had placed it, in the pocket of the coat worn by Sal during her perilous ride, was added, by Isolde's desire, to the sum the law settled upon Sal as Jack Harriman's legal widow. None suspected whence it had come. The only one who knew kept silence. Isolde did not suffer her to keep aloof, however. Shortly after Steele's death she had sought Magdalen, and induced the guilty but penitent woman to return to Newfield with her. Althea, ignorant of the truth, yet suspected the association to be quixotical; and declined to enter the house while Magdalen and Sal inhabited it. Overtaking Kingsley as he was walking from the station on one afternoon of early autumn, she drove him to the gate, however; commissioning him to acquaint Isolde with a sweet secret which, indeed, she was far from unwilling to confide by proxy. The personal confidence would have been embarrassing, even for Althea. It was, that the gold-mine president had capitulated.

Isolde pressed her baby closer to her breast as Kingsley told her; but she made no audible answer. She was thinking of little Gaylord, fatherless now as her own child. The tints of the sunset hovered on her hair, but they desecrated with no color her chastened face, lifting from her sombre garments like a lily pure and pale.

The gate-latch clicked. Up the long path came Jim, and Sal went down to meet him. The grime of the road was washed off him. He was no longer "Engine," but

now "Train-master Jim." The social promotion was reflected in the physical man. He looked strong, proud, confident. But Sal went toward him slowly. The bereft mother-arms, the lonely mother-heart, ached with their emptiness.

Isolde's eyes, rather than her lips, smiled at Kingsley as she pointed to them.

"Her wound will heal," she said. "He must be patient only a little longer. His reward is slow in coming—slow, but sure."

Kingsley had done nobly. He had had it in his power to enrich himself at the expense of the Harriman name, but instead, unknown to Isolde, he had sacrificed, to clear the name, his own large and lawful claim. If he was a poorer man for the deed, he was likewise a happier one. He had been born and bred a good man, and his swerving from the straight path had been an accident. Retracing his steps, he felt the light heart of the exile who treads once more his native heath. Nevertheless the way had been long and lonely, and as he wended it, he had fixed his eyes upon Isolde's face, as the mariner's eyes are fixed on his beacon-star. Did she know it? Ah! what woman would not? But the star, guiding the mariner safely to the haven, shines still afar and inaccessible in the high, calm, vestal skies.

Her words had moved him. Impulsively he drew nearer to her. She read and resolved to answer the unspoken question in his eyes. For an instant she hesitated, her face hidden in her baby's golden curls. When she lifted it there was the light upon it of votive consecration.

"As for me," she said, "the wound will never heal. I have loved, and been loved. Hereafter, my life belongs to my child—my child and his—and to my work."

The man's face paled. He had known that his dream was vain, yet the awakening was bitter. She had her child, and her work. Yes! But what had he?

As if inspired, her soft voice answered his unspoken question. She had stepped beside him, and laid, in speaking, her hand upon his arm.

"In all our lives," she said, "there is some sweet hope unsatisfied, some sweet dream unrealized, some sweet prayer denied. The little pain chastens life, refines, ennobles it. It purifies it from the stain of self; consecrates it to the service of others. A few weak souls fail their mission; yours is not one of these. Look behind you! There, in that shadowed corner, your mission waits you—a great, a noble, a Christ-sent one, not only to the woman, but to womanhood, whose service is the noblest manhood knows. Two years ago you loved her. You love her still, for love is changeless, deathless. You dream that sin has slain it, but the wound is not a death-wound. Even its scar is yielding to her soul's repentant tears."

Silence, long and deep and holy. Silence in the shadowed corner; silence as the man's soul wrestled; silence as the woman sped to God a wordless prayer.

"I would be patient—even for years—asking nothing, claiming nothing. Is there no hope for me, absolutely none?" he cried, miserably.

"There is every hope for you—with her!" she replied. Her answer was final. He accepted it, perforce.

"Then, since you wish it," he said, at last, "I will go to her; but it is too late. She is proud. She will not hear me."

"She will hear you," whispered Isolde. "God be with you. Go."

Toward the shadowed corner he went slowly.

“ Magdalen,” he whispered.

Slowly, joylessly, the beautiful brown eyes lifted—eyes pathetic not in their joylessness, but in their lack of hope.

“ Magdalen,” he said, “ we two stand in the world alone and stranded ; the old life lies behind us—the world, at least to one of us, denies a new. Singly, we are weak—together, strong. A man alone is but half a power, a woman alone, powerless ; but the man and woman united make the motor-force which propels life, controls the world, commands it. Place your woman-hand in mine, Magdalen. We will face the world together ! ”

She yearned toward him as the Peri yearned toward heaven, but her pride resisted.

“ I am not worthy,” she moaned.

“ My worth is lower. For my wounds of sin I ask your box of precious ointment. Not for my feet, Magdalen, but for my heart ! ”

“ I cannot ! ” she sobbed. “ I cannot ! ”

Isolde heard, and answered her.

“ You can, Magdalen,” she whispered. “ Will you listen while I tell you how ? ”

Only the mute eyes answered her—pathetic eyes no longer. Behind their tears was shining the light of hope re-born.

Isolde spoke :

“ To her woman’s place in the world, Life led her. She was young, and very beautiful. Her garments were white and floating, like angel-wings. Her hands were filled with flowers. Experience, an old, white-headed man, smiled bitterly as he saw them. A white rose budded on her breast. Its scent was sweet.”

“ I used to know that sweet white flower,” he said,

“but the world uproots such, and I have forgotten it. Will you tell me its name?”

“Its name,” she said, “is Innocence.”

And he smiled again, the same sad, bitter smile; and summoned one, bold-eyed and glowing-lipped, whose name was Passion.

And Passion asked: “What do you wish of me?”

Experience answered: “She wears the pure white bud of perfect Innocence. Until you wrest it from her, I cannot teach her the lessons she must learn.”

And Passion promised: “I will wrest it from her.” And he sought her, in her garments white and floating like angel-wings.

“You still wear Innocence?” he asked, and leaned toward her, and smiled upon her with his bold, bad eyes.

“I shall wear it always,” she said, shrinking from him.

“You have worn it for the last time,” he exulted. “If you wore it still, you would not shrink thus from me. Its petals would bloom between us, like angel-wings.”

“I wear it still,” she said, with tears in her soft eyes; “but it is fading.”

“It will fade on,” he told her, “until you know why you shrink from me. When you know, it will bloom again—but not as whitely.”

“Tell me why I shrink from you,” she prayed, with outstretched hands, “that it may fade no more.”

He clasped the soft white hands in both his own, and smiled into her eyes.

“Do you know, yet?” he asked her. And she flushed and shrunk and trembled, but she answered, “No!”

Then he drew her closer, face toward face, till their lips met. “Do you know, yet?” he asked again. And she

burned and thrilled and quivered, but her lips still answered, "No."

Then he opened his arms, and caught her closer—closer. Only lips to lips they were no longer, but heart to heart.

"Do you know, now?" he whispered.

And cowering, weeping, shuddering, she answered, "Yes."

And lo! the bud on her breast was the sweet white bud of Innocence no longer. The bud had bloomed, the white rose blushed. Innocence had matured to Knowledge.

Upon the flowers still fair and fresh within her hands she looked down sadly. She was wondering if they too would change.

And Experience came again, and looking at the flowers, drew from them five sweet violets, and asked her, "What are their names?"

And she answered: "These are the blue-eyed flowers of Youthful Dreams, and their names are Faith, Hope, Friendship, Love, and Joy."

"Faith in what?" he asked her.

"Faith is a dual flower," she told him; "and its blossoms are Faith-in-God, and Faith-in-Man!"

And he smiled once more—the same sad, bitter smile; and summoned one, wan-eyed, chill-breathed—by name Unfaith.

"While she wears Faith," he whispered, "I cannot teach her the world's lessons."

And Unfaith breathed upon the blue-eyed flower, and both its blossoms paled and shrunk and—died!

"O my Faith! my Faith!" moaned the maiden, and kissed the dead bud as it fluttered to the ground.

But Unfaith said, and Experience told her he spoke truly :

“Faith was only a dream.”

And Experience touched the second flower. Like Faith, it bore a double blossom. It was bright and warm and fair.

“What is its name ?” he asked her, touching its bluer blossom.

And she answered, “Divine Hope.”

“Hope—of what ?” he questioned.

“Hope of the soul for heaven,” she would have answered, but her voice faltered ; the words failed her. Soul and heaven were dreams, since Faith was but a dream—dreams, all three—dead dreams !

And her tears fell on them, but even as she wept, her sad eyes brightened.

“You have taken from me Innocence, and Faith, and Divine Hope in soul and heaven,” she said ; “but Human Hope at least is left me.”

And he answered, “Is it ?”

And summoned to her side—Despair.

Only three of the blue-eyed flowers of Youthful Dreams were left her. Hope, like Faith, was trampled in the dust.

Experience touched the third flower.

“Its name ?” he asked her.

And she answered “Friendship,” and pressed it to her lips in fond caress.

“Innocence, and Faith, and Hope have fled me,” she sobbed, “but you at least are faithful, O my friend, my friend !”

"You shall test her," smiled Experience. And he summoned the revealer, Truth.

"She says," he whispered, "that her friend is true and faithful."

And Truth asked her: "Besides Friendship, what Youthful Dreams are left?"

And the maiden answered: "Innocence, and Faith, and Hope are wakened; but Friendship dreams on still, and Love, and Joy."

And Truth said: "Friendship, Love, and Joy are dreams that wake all three together," and lifted the veil of Distance, and bade the maiden look.

And in the arms of her lover she saw her friend; and heard them, between their kisses, mock her faith and love; and the dreams of Friendship and Love were wakened, and Joy died, in bearing Pain.

Again Experience sought her. Her hands were almost empty. Faith, and Hope, and Friendship, and Love, and Joy had fled them. Only two fair flowers were left.

One was a pure white lily. Experience touched it.

"I do not know it," he said.

She looked at him with her sad, pure eyes. Her pale lips parted proudly.

"You took my Innocence," she said, "and left me Knowledge. You have robbed me of Faith, and Hope, and Friendship, and Love, and Joy—the sweet brief dreams of Youth and Innocence; but you have done your worst. This lily is mine forever. Its name is Purity."

He gazed at her in wonder.

"You have not sullied it yet?" he asked her.

"I shall never sully it," she answered.

Then he summoned Temptation.

As an angel of light Temptation came to her. His white wings hid his cloven foot.

So she listened to him, at first shyly, then with spell-bound eyes and parted quivering lips. And when he bade her follow him, she went resistlessly ; unheedful of her beautiful lily of Purity, which Temptation, with his cloven foot, was trampling in the dust.

• • • • •

In years that seemed like days to her—Sin wings time, Virtue alone drags it—she returned. She was changed. Her garments, that had been white and floating like angel-pinions, were white and floating no longer. Their white was sullied. They trailed behind her like broken wings. She was very pale, and her lips were as lips of marble. A single flower, the white tube-rose, was in her hand.

Experience shunned her eyes, and fled her. But one replaced him, whose name she did not know.

“Give me your flower,” he told her.

But she clasped it to her breast and pleaded wildly.

“Not this ! not this !” she cried. “I have yielded Innocence, and Faith, and Hope, and Friendship, and Love, and Joy, and Purity. None can give them back. I will not live without them. I will not yield this chill, pale flower—the sweet, sweet flower of Death !”

But he snatched it from her, and flung it backward—far, far back, over the long, lone path her weary spirit must retrace.

And he said to her : “Death I hold to the laughing lips of Joy, but from Pain’s wan lips I wrest it.”

“But why ?” she moaned. “Why ?”

And he answered, "Because I am Retribution, first-born of Justice. And he who sows Pain must reap it, and its seeds are Love, Joy, Sin."

"I sowed no Love," she cried, "for Love, ere Life's springtime, failed me. I sowed no Joy. Pain snatched it from me ere I knew the seed."

"You sowed Sin," he told her.

"Last, not first!" she pleaded.

But he thundered, "First!"

"How?" she moaned.

To the red rose on her breast he pointed sternly.

"As the bud expands to bloom, so my Innocence matured to Knowledge," she sobbed. "I could not hold it back."

And she strove to tear the red rose from its place, but she could not loosen it. Its thorns were bedded in her shuddering woman-breast.

"The bud of Innocence must bloom to Knowledge," he said, "but Life, and Maturity, and Wisdom, and above all, Love, should have matured it. You suffered Passion to usurp them. Therein lay your sin."

And she answered not, but crouched with shamed face, mute.

And Retribution spoke on.

"Faith and Hope," he said, "are theologic virtues, whose pure and holy influence had guarded Friendship true and Love inviolate, if the vice of human Passion had not sullied your soul's shrine. Joy had abided with them, and by their strength Temptation been resisted. Then Purity, the celestial lily, had not been lost and trodden in the dust!"

"The loss, is it eternal?" she moaned. "Shall I never find it, never wear it again? May its sullied petals never more be white?"

Beneath his silence she shrunk in shame and anguish, cowering till her fair head pressed the dust.

“Death! Death! Death!” she moaned.

And he asked her: “Why do you wish for Death, you, who are young and beautiful?”

And she answered: “Because of remorse and shame.”

Then, for the first time, his eyes grew soft and tender. He raised her from the ground, and lifted her face toward his.

“Remorse redeems the sin,” he said. “Be not ashamed. My silence meant no evil. I did not answer, because I do not know. It is a question which not a man, but a woman must answer—a woman who has sinned and has repented, and whose punishment is to wear upon her breast, not the white rose of Death, but the blood-red thorn of Life. The world awaits the answer. Will you be the woman to give it?”

A great but chastened joy flashed into her pale face.

“I will be the woman,” she answered. “O, I will be the woman, if I may!”

“The thorn-wound will be cruel,” he said. “For years it will pierce and torture your woman-heart.”

She bared her warm white breast in swift, mute answer, and over her heart, where the soft flesh was most tender, he sunk the cruel thorn.

“Its prongs are many,” he said: “Pride and Prejudice, the Taunt of Man and the Scorn of Woman; Malice, Envy, Distrust. Their sting is bitter. Can you endure it? It has no human balm.”

“No human balm?” she repeated. “Then what balm has it?”

“The balm,” he answered, “of Divine Forgiveness.”

She fell on her knees. Her face was rapt, exalted.

"Where the God leads, the man must follow," she cried.
"The human forgiveness will come—in time."

And lo! as she rose, eyes wet, and heart still bleeding, the celestial lily of Purity glowed snow-white upon her breast.

.

"Magdalen!" called Kingsley.

She sunk on her knees beside him. The mute act was her answer. She had wept the tears, she had borne the thorn-wounds. Her sin's redemption was consummated with her prayer.

Isolde stole away, leaving the two together. With her child on her breast, she sped through the falling dusk, the deepening shadows, to the brink of the lonely Freshet. In her eyes were tears, but they shone with the light of stars.

"The last of your wrongs is righted," she sobbed, sinking upon her knees and leaning her lips to the chill dark waters. "O my darling, my darling, at last you may sleep in peace!"

Over the twilight shadows a silvery chime broke softly. From the little Catholic chapel was ringing the vesper-bell.

She listened till the last sweet echo faded. Then her eyes turned toward the spire, cross-shaped against the evening sky.

"It is the faith of my fathers," she murmured. "For my son's sake, I will go back to it. It is the faith that keeps men pure because it holds women holy; which makes marriage a sacrament, and love eternal; spanning the grave, and pointing love's service beyond it,—past

the mortal flesh, death-smitten, to the live, immortal soul!"

The words of the grand old requiem recurred to her :

"Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord!"

"And let perpetual light shine upon them."

"May they rest in peace."

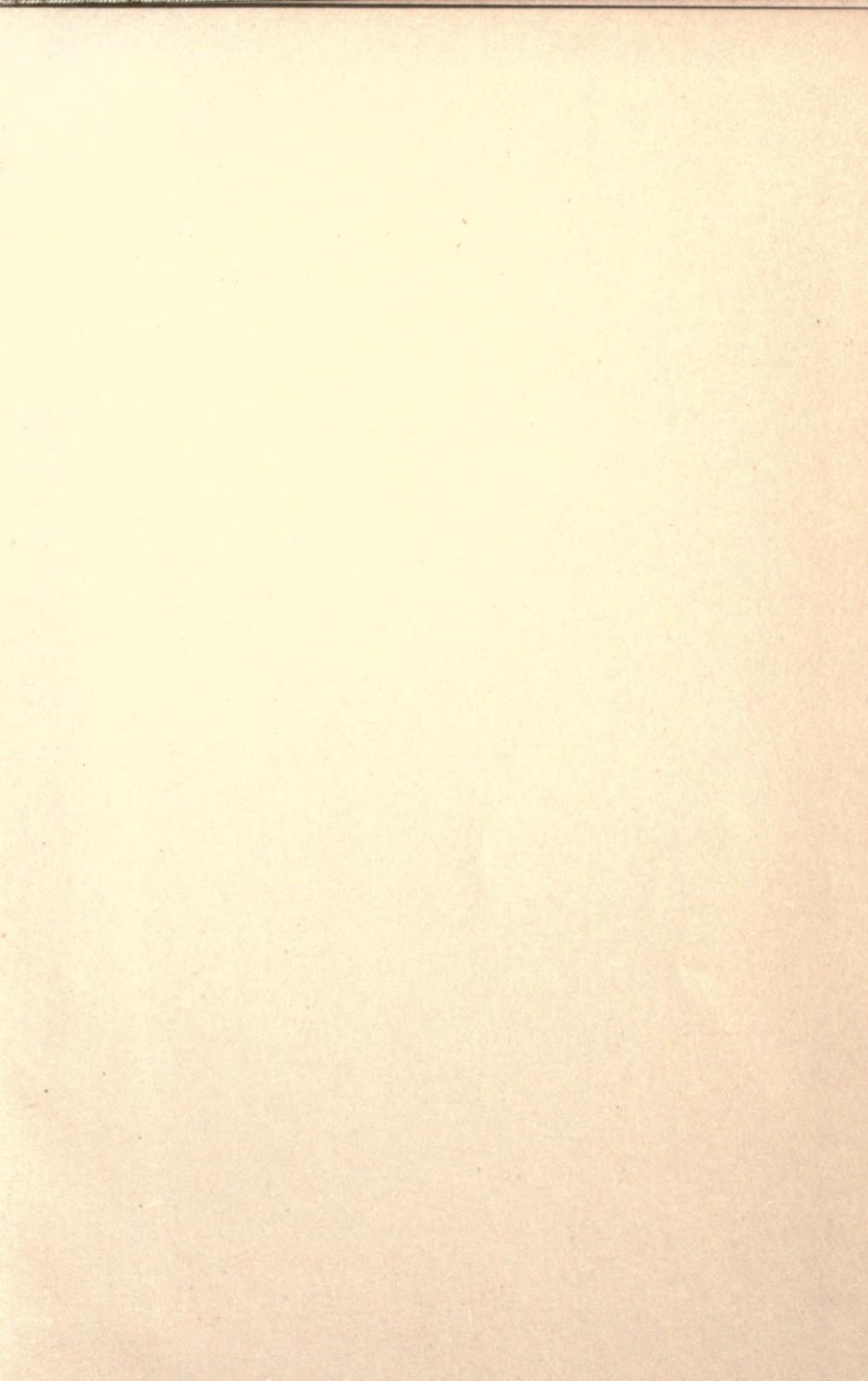
And the Freshet waters responded,
"Amen! Amen!"

THE END.

 . . . "Long green days,
Worn bare of grass and sunshine—long calm nights,
From which the silken sleeps were fretted out,
Be witness for me, with no amateur's
Irreverent haste and busy idleness,
I set myself to art! What then? What's done?
What's done, at last?

Behold at last, a book!"

Aurora Leigh.



W.B. CLARKE & CO.
BOOKSELLERS & STATIONERS
BOSTON.

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 040 093 7

